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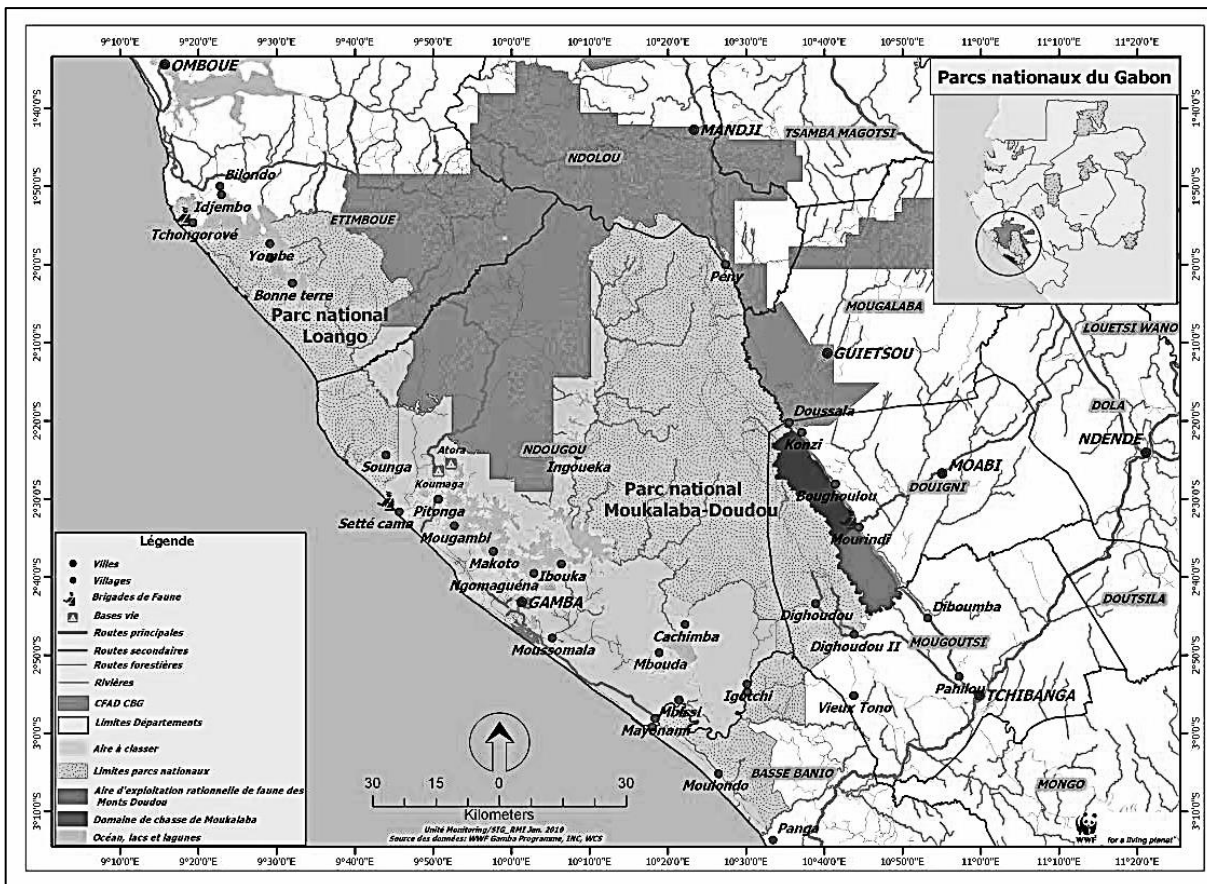
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Author: Mangarella, J.N.

Title: Politics and the longue durée of African oil communities: rentierism, hybrid governance, and anomie in Gamba (Gabon), c. 1950s - 2015 (and beyond)

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4.1. *Tranquillité*: Gamba and the Ndougou, c. 1950s - 1967



Map 6: The Ndougou Lagoon and its villages. (WWF 2010)

The purpose of this sub-chapter is to tell the post-discovery story of the city of Gamba and its overlaying Département de Ndougou in a specific way, and with a specific purpose in mind. That purpose is to delineate the political actors and factors most responsible for changes in observed phenomena and the development of anomic structures. These outcomes include, but are not limited to, the overall satisfaction of the Ndougou’s subjects with their situation as well as their material, spiritual, and associative well-beings (including social and political anomie). Political actors and factors will not be restricted to their formalized variants so prevalent in the West, as

discussed in Chapter 1, but may include any individuals or groups thereof with a demonstrable impact on political events and processes, which in turn impact anomic structures. The two questions to answer in this subchapter are 1) When are the critical junctures in the lives of the Ndougou's community members which significantly affected anomic structures and 2) Who and what were involved with those changes? *How* and *why* those people and institutions were involved is the purview of later chapters.

Since our controlling context is that of oil exploitation, our diachronic story begins shortly before Gabon's independence in 1960, when a consortium of private and state-owned oil companies—the Compagnie Shell de Recherche et d'Exploration au Gabon (COSREG), the Société des Pétroles d'Afrique Equatoriale Française (SPAEF), and elements of the Gabonese state—began exploring the littoral region of the Ogooué-Maritime Province. In 1957, the consortium discovered oil off the coast of Port-Gentil, the region's capital and later Gabon's longstanding oil-industry base of operations. Five years later, in 1962, discoveries were made further south on the island of Mandji. Finally, in 1964 and after approximately four years of prospecting, COSREG/SPAEF discovered the Gamba well, a dozen kilometers south of the present-day Ville de Gamba. The site, close to today's Vembo site, remained an important hub of operations within Shell's development of the area's oilfields. The arrival of the oil industry in one of Gabon's most remote regions would have a considerable and indisputable impact on the lives, and livelihoods, of its autochtones.

It is revealing that the nature of life in the Ndougou around 1960 can only be documented by reference to oral histories and a few scant observations by COSREG (to become Shell-Gabon in 1963), while a broader picture must be inferred and extrapolated through circumstantial evidence and limited archival material. It suggests that the region was indeed as sparse and disconnected from wider economies as observation suggests, and most assuredly based on agrarian modes of production. One detailed report of Gamba, published in 1967 for the purposes of encouraging sound urban development, suggests Shell officials found “no trace” of habitation around the recently granted exploitation zone (formerly Nyanga Wildlife Reserve), as the District of Sette Cama, at 0.5 persons per square kilometer, was among the least dense districts in Gabon.²⁴⁴ The report seemingly corrects COSREG's initial accounts, finding that the local Bavarama

²⁴⁴ SMUH, *Gamba*.

autochtones were scattered in villages of 25-100 around the lagoon.²⁴⁵ This latter estimate appears accurate and agrees with original participant estimates, the more elderly of whom tend to describe a more vibrant lagoon dotted with “real” villages. It also agrees with prefectural reports, which attest to the District having at least 24 villages (presumably not including temporary fishing, plantation, and hunting encampments). Perhaps the reason for why COSREG found no trace of civilization is because the region was indeed described as “very calm.”²⁴⁶ Sette Cama by the time of oil prospection had maintained its historical role as the economic and political capital of the lagunar region, evidenced by its status as the seat of the District’s *sous-préfet*. The village is estimated to have been inhabited by approximately 200 people at this time.

While most of pre-oil lagunar population was engaged in agrarian activities which persist to this day, a small minority held public or private sector jobs. As mentioned in Chapter 2.1, Sette Cama had historically been the hub for the slave, ivory, and wood trades. But with the effective ban on slavery and slave trading as well as newer laws prohibiting the poaching of now-protected wildlife,²⁴⁷ foresting had become the only local activity on a commercial scale. The reach of the lumber industry, though, must have been limited, however destructive it had been to those unfortunate enough to suffer its exploits. Indeed, the nominal *chef de village* of Mougagara, a small village separated from the Ndougou by the Nyanga river, expressed a deep mistrust for “whites,” recalling the time when the French lumber company was active in the region. They had reportedly abandoned their lumbering operations with everything in a ruined state, among which were the people themselves, who had to carry colonial officers on their backs. The chief described this state of forced labor as “*esclavage*.”²⁴⁸ Nevertheless, reports suggest that less than 10% of the Ndougou were likely employed, in some capacity, by the foresters in the late colonial and early independence periods.²⁴⁹ This meant that the Ndougou’s direct experience with foreign aims was limited., despite an internationally renowned hunting lodge in Sette Cama serving Western clients, and despite the collective memory of foreign Catholic missionaries.

²⁴⁵ *ibid.*

²⁴⁶ « Fiche d’Activités du Mois de Janvier, 1968, District Autonome de Gamba” by J. Bernard Saulnerond, Le Préfet de l’Ogooué-Maritime, February 8, 1968, Carton 3375, Région de l’Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d’activités, 1968, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

²⁴⁷ Le décret du 18 novembre 1947 réglementant la chasse dans les territoires africains; le décret du 27 avril 1954 relatif à la protection de la nature dans les territoires africains; la loi n° 46/60 du 8 juin 1960 réglementant l’exercice de la chasse et l’usage des armes de chasse, et son décret d’application, le décret n° 84/PR du 12 avril 1961.

²⁴⁸ Chef de Village of Mougagara

²⁴⁹ Plan de développement local

Aside from state employees attached to the *sous-préfet* in Sette Cama, the vast majority of inhabitants of the Ndougou had no salary and either subsistence farmed, fished, or gathered their dietary means of existence. They often relocated their villages to take advantage of fields lying fallow. The local economy was therefore not monetized to a sufficient extent which would allow money to play a role in local affairs. No evidence suggests there was any practical means to import food products or more advanced technology other than through COSREG (Shell-Gabon). Though several autochtones of older generations had completed studies in Port Gentil, all interviewees claimed to have returned for their families. While several contemporary reports suggest that commercial fishing may become a viable alternative after the complete departure of the oil industry, there is nothing to indicate that any of the autochtones had taken to larger-scale or deep-sea fishing. A report mentions locals still using dugout canoes and rowing to the banks of Ndougou to sell fish, and when several elder interviewees were asked about pre-oil industry travel,²⁵⁰ they unanimously cited their manual *pirogues*. A villager from Ingouéka, for example, stated that before Shell's arrival and the post-oil proliferation of motorized boats, it would take three days to arrive at the only primary school in the area, located at the time in Sette Cama.²⁵¹ The same dugout rowboats were ostensibly used for fishing in the lagoon's bountiful fresh waters. Further proof of the relative lack of industry existed in the near-absence of roads unrelated to the local foresting companies, something which Shell would have to address upon discovery of the Gamba well.²⁵²

As with now, political authorities before oil were diverse and most likely competed with one another. The state was embodied in the *sous-préfet* in Sette Cama with its various agents enforcing the decrees of Gabon's executive branch as well as adjudicating more serious disputes. Before independence, the colonial state was needed to carry out forced labor, where young men were impressed into the transportation of felled trees as well as the construction of infrastructure needed to support the foresting scheme. A "commandant" and militia had been charged with manning security checkpoints at the mouth of the Nyanga and in Sette Cama. It was illegal for anyone to fell a palm tree, and the act was punishable by up to several months or even years in prison. Another source of authority derived from agents patrolling the newly created parks and

²⁵⁰ SMUH, Gamba.

²⁵¹ Interviews with villagers of Ingouéka, August 3, 2015

²⁵² S. Blaney, S. Mbouity, P. Moussounda Nzamba, J-M Nkombé, M. Thibault, O. Mboumba Mavoungou, and J.P. Bayé, "Caractéristiques Socio-Economiques de la Ville de Gamba, Département de Ndougou." (WWF-Programme Régional pour l'Afrique Centrale, Libreville, Gabon: 1998).

protected wildlife areas, though it remains unclear whether poaching laws in protected areas were ever truly enforced.

In such an environment of agrarian production coupled with the relative absence of cost-effective transportation and low state presence, villagers ostensibly counted on local lineage chiefs and *ngangas* to provide social and religious services, enforce customs and law, and regulate land tenure. A professor of linguistics at the University of Omar Bongo (UOB) claims the criteria for succession to chieftaincy were rather precise and encompassing. The chiefly status was “mystic-spiritual,” and the pretender needed customary knowledge (such as proverbs, lineage knowledge, and the protocol for dispute resolution, “*voyance*”) and ideally a “double view” which permitted the candidate to “*veiller le jour comme la nuit.*”²⁵³ This consisted of the pretender/candidate demonstrating his having had an “astral voyage” to enable him to see where ancestral spirits and earthly embodiments met. Only then could one therefore be competent to serve the chief’s function of land tenure. In those days, *chef de terre/linéage* and *chef administratif* were not necessarily separable when *chefs de terre* were appointed to take up administrative roles.

Though it remains common practice for those interested in procuring land to receive the assent of a *chef de village*, it exists today as a vestige or symbol of respect for former chiefly prerogatives exercised by *chefs de terre*. In the beginning of the 1960s, however, such may not have been the case. Several interviewees and one report claim that during the time of Shell’s arrival, a first-comer named Fidèle Boukosso, Vili of the Kuani clan, controlled the contemporary area of Gamba. Anyone wishing to inhabit or use the land had to obtain Mr. Boukosso’s permission, who would then allocate a plot of land and adequate space to practice “traditional activities,” such as farming or spiritual worship. In fact, such was Boukosso’s authority that Shell reportedly entered negotiations with him and his clan, who dictated to Shell where oil prospecting could take place. Boukosso reportedly had lots of power in the region, and though he held no legal title, he had “*une influence mystique.*”²⁵⁴ Though ultimately difficult to verify (Shell-Gabon is sensitive to charges of extra-legal bargaining), the legend of Boukosso’s direct negotiations with Shell reveals an idealization of the past. The outcome of presumed negotiations was the discovery of the nearby Ivinga well, after which Shell built a cement house for the Boukosso clan and even offered fresh water and transportation for the clan’s schoolchildren, via a dirt road which already

²⁵³ Interview with Professor Mouvongu, UOB, Libreville, July 6, 2015.

²⁵⁴ Interview with the Secretary General of City Hall, September 7, 2015.

existed between Sette Cama and the area of Gamba.²⁵⁵ Despite the uniquely low density of inhabitation in and around present-day Gamba, Shell, with the full backing of the Gabonese state, thought it worthwhile to placate local interests, however modest its gestures were.

Lastly, many interviewees, especially among the elders, collectively recall the pre-oil era as a time of relative tranquility and broad-based satisfaction with the way things were, which could be considered “traditional.” Most, but not all, interlocutors invoke the righteous deeds of healers, claiming in addition that relatively few people—or witches and sorcerers—used their innate powers of psychokinesis and telepathy to adversely affect their brethren, as is often the case today. Reporting to Libreville in 1968, the Prefect of the Ogooué-Maritime, J. Bernard Saulnerond, claimed that “*féticheurs ou herboristes vivent en bon accord avec tous les autres villageois*,” suggesting that while sorcery may have been an issue in other areas of Gabon and thus required consistent monitoring by the executive in Libreville, it certainly was not the case in the Ndougou.²⁵⁶ Dispensing with the idea that “modern,” “rational” systems of social provisions and public authority had not existed, the sitting Senator of Gamba, an autochtone of the region, laid out the basics of a relatively intricate institutional framework. Four classes of *ngangas* existed: Healers, who could be counted on for a range of illnesses from headaches and toothaches to malaria; consultants, who advised the chief in his duties; initiators who were responsible for properly initiating villagers into sects; and *fétichistes*, the guardians of the spirits’ earthly embodiments. Western medicine was virtually non-existent in the countryside.²⁵⁷

Money also had limited importance, and the tilt of evidence suggests that traditional forms of solidarity were in place. Even as late as the 1960s, at least one witness confirms that autochtones of the Ndougou lagoon were still using seashells as currency when needed and were otherwise bartering.²⁵⁸ Women planted, men picked, and people lived “very well,” according to the Senator. People drank palm wine, as *le vin des blancs* and whisky were not as procurable, though alcoholism remained rare. The *troublement politique* one can observe today was relatively absent from public

²⁵⁵ Blaney et al., *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

²⁵⁶ “Fiche d’Activités du Mois de Janvier, 1968, District Autonome de Gamba” by J. Bernard Saulnerond, Le Préfet de l’Ogooué-Maritime, February 8, 1968, Carton 3375, Région de l’Ogooué-Maritime, Fiches mensuelles d’activités, 1968, Archives Nationales du Gabon, Libreville, Gabon.

²⁵⁷ Interview with current Senator from Gamba, Interviewee’s Residence, Gamba, August 19, 2015.

²⁵⁸ Interview with Secretary-General of City Hall, City Hall, Gamba, August 31, 2015.

life.²⁵⁹ Prostitution, often a desperate calling of today's moneyless women and girls in oil-bearing communities throughout the world, did not apparently exist.²⁶⁰

According to several testimonies, public spaces existed in every village of the lagoon, and were centered upon the *dibandza*, known today as the *corps de garde*. A “*salle polyvalente*,” it was a pavillion-like structure where one ate communally, consulted elders and village notables, or cared for people in need.²⁶¹ One brother of the Ndougou's cantonal chief remembers the healer, who terribly frightened him with his strange behavior and dress, treating people for malaria and distributing a form of mosquito nets.²⁶² It is easy to conceive of the *dibandza* as the space where oral history and knowledge of lineage was transmitted via the grandparents of today's middle-aged autochtones,²⁶³ and where Bwiti and Ndjembe were once observed more assiduously.

As hinted at earlier, if the Bongo regime appointed a chief without clan ties, he rarely had local legitimacy.²⁶⁴ Few foreigners, including Gabon's predominant Fang, were known to the autochtones of the early 1960s, and harmony with others was only gradually known and accepted after the arrival of COSREG,²⁶⁵ thus it is unsurprising that outsiders claiming authority would arouse suspicion. In the past, even the nearby Punu, though respected as people, were not permitted to intermarry within Loumbou clans. For historical reasons documented above, outsiders had always been termed “slaves.”²⁶⁶

From a strictly methodological perspective, it is unfortunate that independence should have occurred in 1960, as Shell was then prospecting the Ndougou for oil finds. But the obtention of independence in Gabon did not impact anomic structures as significantly as oil production, which has been made clear. Only from 1967 did the Omar Bongo regime adopt a deliberate policy of naming chiefs who were obedient to the ruling party, as the French had done with respect to the colonial state; only the second administrative criterion was that the chiefs have “traditional legitimacy.”²⁶⁷

²⁵⁹ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶⁰ Dr. Sisso

²⁶¹ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶² Interview with Robert Moundanga, Pitonga, August 21, 2015.

²⁶³ Interview with Etienne Pouebou, Pitonga, August 13, 2015.

²⁶⁴ Interview with Professor Ratanga-Atoz, Interviewee's Residence, Libreville, July 8, 2015.

²⁶⁵ Senator from Gamba, August 19

²⁶⁶ Interview with M. Koumba, Jurist, Loumbou, Interviewee's Offices in Libreville, July 8, 2015.

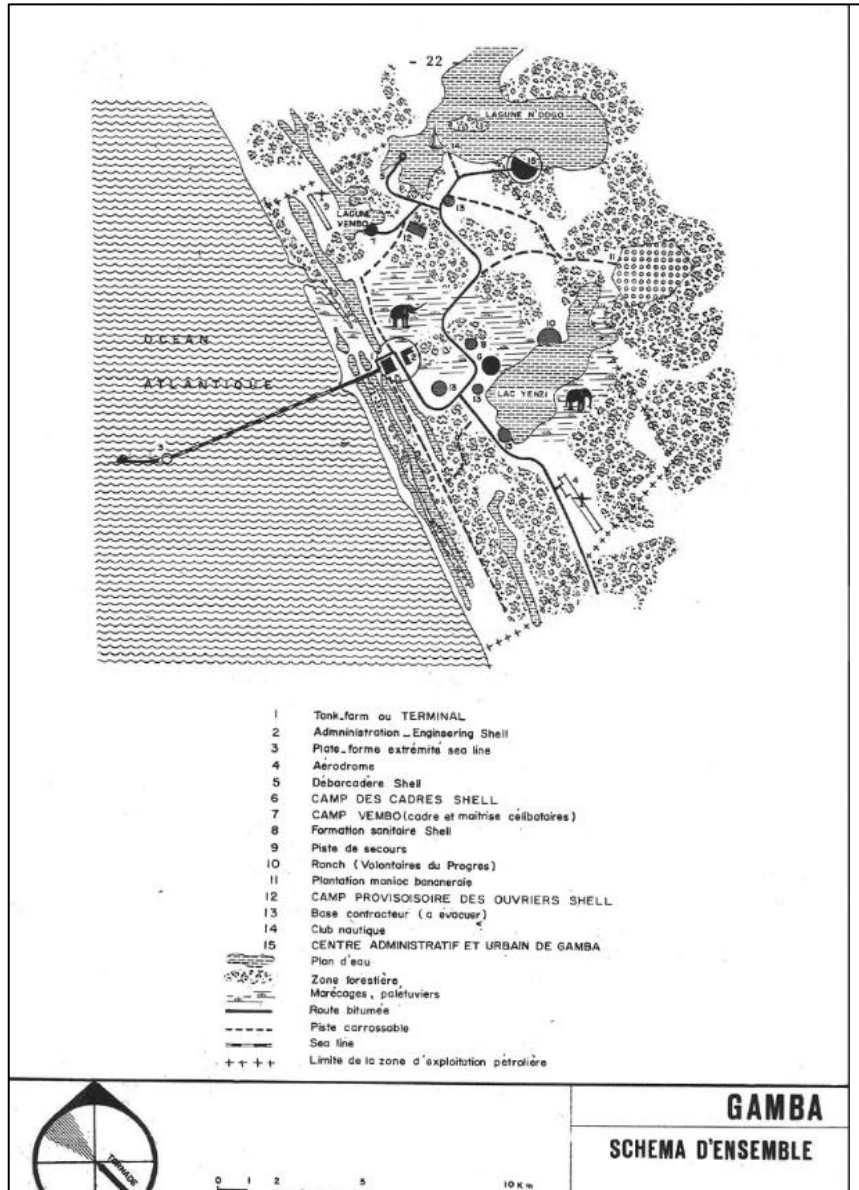
²⁶⁷ Interview with Professor of anthropology Joseph Tonda, UOB, Libreville, July 7, 2015.

4.2. The First Drops: Gamba and the Ndougou, 1967-1989

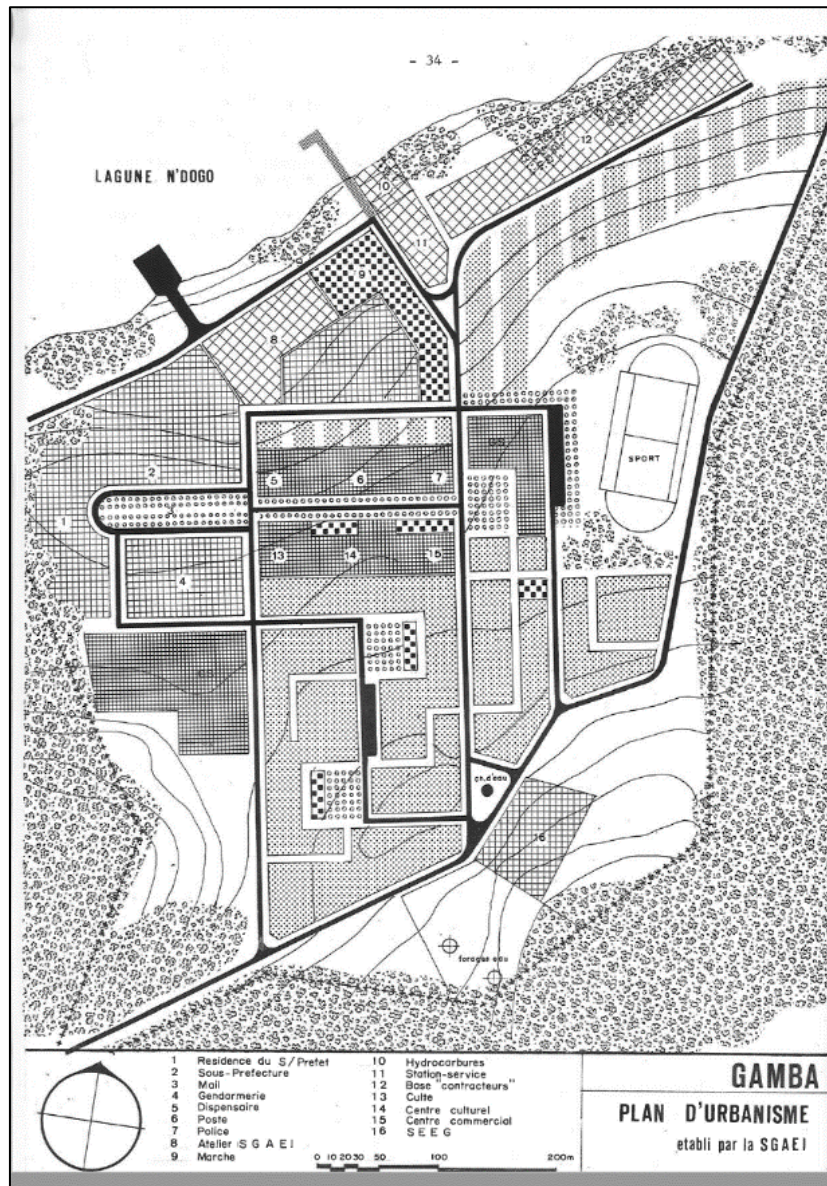
Events proceeded quickly after Shell's discovery of the Gamba well in 1964. Two years later, in 1966, investments were procured to begin extraction. Analyses by Shell/SPAEF projected 3.5-4.0 million tons of oil between 1967 and 1975, progressing towards 6 million tons in 1980 before decline would set in.²⁶⁸ The infrastructure and personnel needed to extract crude oil necessitated a host of lodging and services, which quickly became a priority after Shell had completed a sea-line meant to send crude oil from the recently built pipeline terminal at Point Pedras to the deeper waters of the Gulf of Guinea, where the crude would then be shipped for refining. While Shell relied heavily on local manpower for construction of these basic elements, engineers and management came from trained professionals in the West or in Port Gentil. Early construction workers were housed in hastily built wooden structures near the present-day Vembo encampment, threatening unplanned and dangerous urban development if not managed properly.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁸ SMUH, *Gamba*, 5.

²⁶⁹ SMUH, *Gamba*, 9.



Map 7: Shell's Concession, c. 1970. (SMUH)



Map 8: Urban Plan for Gamba. (SMUH)

Shell therefore set about convincing the Gabonese government to adopt its proposed urbanization plan to accompany an expected jump in the local population, due not only to Shell's employees and contractors but also to regional migrants hopeful of finding work. In and outside the exploitation concession granted to Shell, the company hoped to model its real estate organization after what La Compagnie Minière de l'Ogooué (COMILOG) had done for its manganese mines in Moanda, taking charge of lodging and furnishings for its personnel, from management and specialists to workers and even commerce and local administrators. For

managers and specialists/engineers, lodging would be provided within walking distance to the pipeline terminal at Pedras (the future Yenzi camp), while workers would be lodged just outside the exploitation zone in order to allow for free development of the concession (the future Plaine 3 of Gamba). Foreign workers—non-local Gabonese, African, and Western—would, in the case of non-Gabonese, be granted limited citizenship rights during their terms of stay. The provision of real estate and amenities would attempt a proper living environment in order to avert homesickness, especially in a sparse environment heretofore “neglected” by the Gabonese administration.²⁷⁰ In addition to the urbanization plan, Shell proposed a new administrative agglomeration coterminous with the planned creation of Gamba.

Evidence suggests the Gabonese government accepted Shell’s proposals unconditionally, as today’s urban layout perfectly resembles Shell’s initial intentions. One can only postulate that Gabon’s ready acceptance was due to the importance of the new finds for the national economy, alongside a growing acknowledgement that mismanagement of extraction may lead to the kind of “socioeconomic revolution”²⁷¹ seen in other contentious extractive spaces. In 1967, the same year Shell’s proposals were pushed through Gabon’s state instruments, the local Ivinga field was also discovered. The Gabonese state, by all accounts an arm of the newly inaugurated President Ali Bongo, acceded to Shell’s requests that the state take charge of the management of construction outside the exploitation zone, i.e. Gamba. The state responded by naming the Société Gabonaise d’Aménagement et d’Équipement Immobilier (SGAEI) to plan the urban development of Gamba, which itself was decreed an agglomeration on November 2, 1967. In January of 1968, SGAEI’s board of executives approved a multi-phase construction plan. The short term phase would realize the construction of several elements, including a *base d’accostage* to service the existing and intensifying traffic in the Ndougou lagoon, housing for 250 workers and their families (estimated at 1,250 people total), and social and administrative structures to accommodate a longer term projected population of 5,000-6,000 people. In the medium term (less than five years), SGAEI aimed to attract “exterior support” for the projected influx of migrants, as well as provisions to accommodate an additional population of 1,500-2,000. In the longer term (20+ years), SGAEI envisaged a decline in the supply of unskilled labor via Shell and its contractors, coupled with an increase in the need for technological expertise to operate ageing wells, themselves expected to

²⁷⁰ SMUH, *Gamba*, 9.

²⁷¹ SMUH, *Gamba*, 8-11.

dry up within 20 years. Longer term plans thus included improvements in the quality of existing housing to meet the needs of higher skilled workers. Little to no planning was made to achieve sustainability for a post-oil scenario, and as early as 1970 foreign researchers were calling for the de-enclavization of Gamba with a road connecting Gamba to the regional hub to the north, Tchibanga.²⁷² No such road has yet been built, and local politicians perennially adopt the completion of such a road as part of their campaign platforms.

From 1967 to 1968, Shell did achieve the completion of a road from the heart of its exploitation zone (including Gamba) to Mayonami, dozens of kilometers to the southeast on the banks of the Nyanga. Though the road went some way towards connecting Gamba to Gabon's highway network, those traveling to and from Gamba would still need a bush taxi and ferry to access Mayonami from today's N6, which cuts south towards Mayumba once it reaches the coast. In any case, the road was built not to develop the region, a public ambition, but to connect Shell's new harbor for provisions and materials at Mayonami to the heart of the exploitation zone. Shell has since claimed that the construction of this road was philanthropic, despite this evidence to the contrary, but has hinted at possibly linking Mayonami to the N6 with a road extension.²⁷³

By July of 1969, SGAEI had completed the first phase of its development of Gamba, roughly five months behind schedule; delays were attributed to Shell's prioritization of shipping for its own needs, rather than those of SGAEI, as well as to poor management of unskilled laborers. Nevertheless, much of the infrastructure one witnesses today was put in place then, within and outside the exploitation sector. Within the exploitation zone, the newly constructed *cit  des cadres* ("management housing complex") at Lake Yenzi housed mostly Westerners and *assimil s*, who with their families comprised 250 people (150 lived at Yenzi). Shell's permanent employees numbered 250 people, while contractors contributed an additional 200. With foreign Africans rare, non-Western recruits came mostly from Tchibanga and elsewhere in the Nyanga region, as many in Port Gentil declined to make a living in Gamba's seemingly enclaved environment. Shell's employees together operated the tank farm (terminal), maintained the sea-line and platform, operated the two runways (one of which was exclusively used for medical purposes), worked the harbor, and staffed the engineering and administration centers near the terminal. As part of Shell's original plans to provide a livable environment for foreigners and non-locals, there was a medical

²⁷² SMUH, *Gamba*, 11-13.

²⁷³ Interview with Armelle Zabatier, Social Performance, Shell-Gabon, Gamba, July 23, 2015.

clinic at Yenzi (though not at Camp Vembo), a manioc plantation, a supermarket at Yenzi, and a nautical club on the lagoon. Though today many of these services are still utilizable by Shell's employees, the company had apparently lent their usage to non-Shell employees for decades following their implementation.

Outside the exploitation zone in "Plaine 3" of the newly decreed agglomeration of Gamba, SGAEI, funded almost entirely by Shell, built its first wave of housing, the local headquarters of the national gendarmerie, a medication dispensary, a post office, local offices for the Société d'Electricité et d'Energie du Gabon (SEEG), a market, and a school for one group of three classes (including lodging provided by the United States Peace Corps). SGAEI contracted with Shell for its own structures, while the real estate firm contracted with the Gabonese state for all public buildings. Though SEEG's early presence suggests minimal state capacity for providing electricity, it was in fact Shell that laid most cables and provided power. Shell had also supplied potable water to all of Gamba's inhabitants.²⁷⁴

The immediate effects of Shell's arrival and construction in and outside its designated exploitation zone were principally in changing demographics, changed ambitions and expectations, popular concentration, and the emergence of new public authorities. It should be kept in mind that while a new cash nexus was being created upon Shell's arrival, the Ndougou had not been so removed from more global events to shy from seeking out salaried work, not only with fading forester consortiums in the area, but also in regional hubs such as Port Gentil and Mayumba. The thousands of people inhabiting the Ndougou were thus attentive to the perceived advantages of money, even as the majority were engaged in subsistence agriculture. The scale of monetization was less than what would eventually come, permitting the continuation of "tradition" in the broader sense.

Contrary to today's policy, it seemed to have been a government policy in the 1960s to regroup the Ndougou's villagers, perhaps to more efficiently deliver services, tax, and showcase authority. Nevertheless, there is little evidence to support any active attempts by the government to achievement *regroupement*, except perhaps with the relocation of the state authorities to Plaine 3 of Gamba from their original offices in Sette Cama as well as the definitive shifting of the administrative apparatus from Sette Cama to Gamba in the 1970s. One is thus led to conclude,

²⁷⁴ SMUH, *Gamba*.

based on the timing of population movements and the reasons cited, that Shell's arrival was among the primary causes of popular concentration, fueled by a desire to earn money as a means to better one's and one's family's lives following the experiences transmitted from family members in larger population centers.

The conclusion that COSREG/Shell's arrival led to popular concentration is supported by accounts from today's elder villagers, who remember more agreeable times when Shell was actively employing many locals for short-term intervals. Several interlocutors agree that the ex-CEO of Shell-Gabon was active in preventing local autochtones from being "bullied" by the company and its outsiders, going as far as to favor locals for relevant jobs at a rate of an alleged 80%.²⁷⁵ Positive sentiments regarding Shell's earlier recruitment procedures were echoed by several other Ndougou elders, who are in many cases chiefs today. The cantonal chief in Pitonga, who began employment with Shell in 1976 by replacing a "white", went as far as to claim this was the *de facto* end of colonialism.²⁷⁶

The Ndougou village population was reportedly in decline throughout the 1960s, assembling in villages closer to Gamba and even settling outside Gamba in the hopes of finding salaried work. The village of Vera disappeared after its former inhabitants relocated in Ibouka, while was relocated to the larger agglomeration of Mbari-Mossi. To the northwest of Gamba, several outer encampments clustered together on the banks of the Ndougou to form the village of Mougambi, which in Loumbou/Vili means "difficult swamps,"²⁷⁷ an indication that the new village was willing to withstand difficult terrain in order to access what would likely be a lucrative fishing trade. To the southeast, a chiefly succession feud in the village of Mougagara, in 1958, led to the creation of Mayonami on the opposite banks of the Nyanga. Mayonami's founder, Séraphin Pandsou, had promised his followers that the new site with its natural harbor would soon become a regional commercial hub; by all accounts, Shell's provisions dock has proven this to be the case. The leaders of the new village decided to name it "Mayonami," which in Omyené translates

²⁷⁵ J.S. Koumba, July 8

²⁷⁶ Interview with the Ndougou Cantonal Chief, Interviewee's Residence, Pitonga, August 21, 2015. For positive confirmation of Shell's earlier hiring practices: Interview with *Regroupement* Chief of Sette Cama, Sette Cama beaches, July 30, 2015; Interview with Professor Djoumata, high school teacher, Gamba High School, August 18, 2015.

²⁷⁷ S. Blaney, S. Mbouity, J-M Nkombé and M. Thibault, "Caractéristiques Socio-économiques des Populations des Départements de Ndougou et de la Basse-Banio." (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 1997.Blaney 1997), 9

roughly as “do not mock me because you do not know what I shall become,”²⁷⁸ an indication that family feuds and the prospect of riches may have become more intertwined. Elsewhere, villages such as Sette Cama remained vibrant through the early period of Shell’s arrival.²⁷⁹

As the lagunar-autochtonal population regrouped and moved into strategic trade positions, the newly christened town of Gamba saw a sharp influx of mostly foreign workers, almost all of whom were salaried and working for Shell, SEEG, SGAEI, or one of Shell’s various contractors. The period marking the completion of Plaine 3 in 1969 through the mid-1970s represented the region’s steepest growth in population, a boom not rivaled until the discovery of the gigantic Rabi and Kounga oilfields in 1984 and 1986 respectively. From its inception, Gamba has therefore never been a town of autochtones. Roughly half the population by the 1970s were of foreign or non-autochtonal Gabonese origin. Along with the arrival of European-American management, Gamba began to assume a cosmopolitan disposition out of proportion to its humble population of roughly 6,000. Evidencing this growth was the arrival of several supermarket chains by the late 1960s (autochtonal tradition required no imported food), including Ceca-Gadis in 1966 which served management, and Gaboprix years later which catered to African workers with money to spend. By 1967, the population had already filled the school in Sette Cama to capacity, forcing the government to borrow rooms from the Assemblée Départementale. Two years later, the United States Peace Corps completed its construction of Gamba’s first primary school, still in use today.

As previously mentioned, the Gabonese government had agreed with Shell that a stable community could not be achieved without the demonstrable presence of law enforcement and administration. In the late 1960s, the sous-préfecture was thereby moved to Gamba, and the former District of Sette Cama had become the District of Sette Cama-Gamba. The chieftaincy in Sette Cama did not fully accept this decision, and even agitated against the administrative district redrawing. In fact, it has been reported that the government’s decision to retain the name Sette Cama in the new district was in symbolic deference to Sette Cama’s local chiefs. By 1970, however, the full administrative arm of the state had been moved to Gamba, and Sette Cama, once the economic and political hub of the region, had been re-transformed to a fishing village based on subsistence.

²⁷⁸ C. Mboulou Mve, and Simplicie Mbouitsi, “Raport Mission: Cararacteristiques Socio-Economiques et Culturelles du Village Mayonami (département de Ndougou).” (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Gamba, Gabon: 2004)

²⁷⁹ Interview with Chef de regroupement of Sette Cama

In 1971, President Omar Bongo formally inaugurated the town of Gamba in what must have been a ceremony charged with pride and pomp; today a humble stone obelisk outside the sous-préfecture marks the occasion. Shell and the Gabonese State had reason to celebrate, as it had only taken approximately 6 years since the discovery of the Gamba well to build a more or less full-functioning town, which by then had included most of the planned housing in Plaine 3 as well as construction sites dedicated to the offices for utility companies, the administrative apparatus including the gendarmerie, a hospital, a cultural center, and an airport which would eventually be serviced in 1978 by the now-defunct Air Gabon. Furthermore, construction on the Yenzi management housing began in 1970. By the time it was finished, it would effectively become a town on its own, secured by private guards and maintained by private contractors.

It is significant that a President with known ties to the French governing class and an affinity for urbane living would visit the region least populated by his own constituents, and which presumably held little to no sway in the determination of electoral success. From 1962 to 1967, foresting occupied the bulk of Gabon's formal, monetized economy. But with the oil boom in 1970, foresting was quickly relegated as the country's primary source of foreign currency. President Bongo, quick to recognize the importance of oil for the continuity of his regime, most likely wanted to lend Shell the regime's full administrative support.

Between 1974 and 1984, the year of the discovery of the Rabi-Kounga field, few changes took place with respect to added infrastructure or services in Gamba, save for the planned interventions of SGEI which were completed in 1977, mentioned above. Estimates suggest that the overall population grew at a slower pace than in the years immediately following the first decade of oil exploitation. Migrants to Gamba in the early 1980s—migrants only very sparsely populate the traditional village sites of the Ndougou lagoon—came in large part from nearby Tchibanga, as well as from other Francophone West African countries such as Mali, Senegal, Benin and Togo.²⁸⁰ The influx of migrants speaks to a sedimentation of new expectations as a result of economic change. Since Shell had already filled its salaried positions, even reducing its short-term demand for unskilled labor following the implementation of necessary logistics and infrastructure, most migrants must have been attracted to the prospect of earning money as shopkeepers in *petit commerce*. Others may have been vaguely optimistic of gaining employment

²⁸⁰ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

with either Shell or one of its contracted firms, despite the downward trend in salaried job offers which had been predicted as early as the 1960s.

As for the local population of autochtones, few historical records exist to sufficiently describe in statistical detail any changes that may have taken place affecting their livelihoods from 1967 to 1984. However, ignoring momentarily the adverse conditions created by the development of wildlife reserves (see below), the collective remembrance of these years seems to be positive. Many autochtones recall a life made easier by certain material benefits in their daily lives. Gradually the traditional reliance on hand-lit torches was replaced by reliance on gas lamps, rowing was being replaced by motorized boats, and wood fires were being replaced by propane (at least in those villages close to Gamba). Shell was also systematically providing anti-malarials, generously transporting non-Shell locals between regional destinations, helping to construct the medical clinic in Gamba, and evacuating ill locals free of charge. These benefits were greatly welcome, and appreciated, by the elders of today's Ndougou.

Material benefits, i.e. technology, may have come to autochtones through the employment of autochtones in Shell's earlier efforts. One sociologist at the UOB remarks that it was autochtonal Shell employees who gradually came to fill the ranks of the chieftaincy and local political class, thanks to the goods they were able to distribute among their village clans.²⁸¹ This subversive process effectively eviscerated one criterion for chiefly succession, *connaissances*, in favor of money, leading to the palpable loss of traditional knowledge and *savoir-faire* one may witness today and which endangers the Ndougou's long-term sustainability in the absence of the oil industry. By and large, however, this period was one where "*tout était tranquille*," according to a local civil servant who is often critical of Shell and laments his parents' and grandparents' lack of consciousness in extracting more benefits from the oil giant.²⁸² Some traditional systems of solidarity during this period (1967-1989) also appeared to remain in place. One measure of monetization and its impact on local change is the cost of dowries, and at least one village recalls the standard bridewealth's past affordability at 10,000-15,000 Fcfa, indicating that the most important elements of bridewealth remained a list of symbolic goods. Additionally, park regulation (see below) was only in its infant stages, allowing the lagunar population to practice its

²⁸¹ Interview with Dimitri Ndombi, UOB, Libreville, July 7, 2015

²⁸² Interview with "Mousse" of Marine Marchand, Gamba, July 24 2015

traditions of slaughtering elephants, monkeys, buffalo, etc. for the purposes of ceremony and communal subsistence. This would later change.

Most documentation obtained for the purposes of historicizing the Ndougou's oil experience clusters around important dates in the oil industry as well as in the development of national parks, both of which have garnered sufficient international attention to be documented in NGO, public and private sector reports. Nevertheless, the preservation of Gabon's forests has been an ambition of the Bongo dynasty since early independence. Furthermore, the Ndougou, which is today located in between vast wildlife reserves, had early on been billed for wildlife protection. The array of laws and interdictions would progressively draw ire and grievances from local communities moderately dependent on fishing and hunting for their sources of protein.

After the creation of the Parc National de Loango in 1956 and its subsequent conversion to a wildlife reserve (the cost of maintenance and enforcement was too high), a host of legal instruments followed aimed at regulating traditional hunting and fishing practices in the Ndougou. It is not certain whether or how the oil industry affected these developments, but rather the preservation of wildlife seems to have been a broader national initiative by the Bongo regime keen on bolstering its public image. The initiatives may have also been born from a desire by the national government to agglomerate the Ndougou's sparse inhabitants. In 1962 and 1966, two decrees created a total of seven protected areas in the *aires d'exploitation rationnelles* of Moukalaba-Dougoua and Sette-Cama. Concurrent with these decrees, and further complicating the analysis of external agency in regulating the Ndougou's wildlife, were the exploits of the locally notorious Maurice Patry, the French hunter-adventurer who has since published various accounts of his travels in Equatorial and Central Africa. After several hinterland journeys in the 1950s, Patry returned to Sette Cama to establish a hunting lodge only hundreds of meters north of Sette Cama, the predecessor of a fishing lodge today. The lodge operated throughout the 1960s and counted many global elite among its clientele. Patry, according to his own and local accounts, established cordial relationships with locals with whom he shared the spoils of his kills. However, today's administrative chief of the Ndougou canton claims that he became somehow less generous over time. There also seem to be complaints of today's successor fishing lodge in Sette Cama disallowing locals from fishing in particular areas, lest they disturb the potential catch of tourists.

Lastly, Patry mentions in *Babiroussa* a successful attempt to have the Ndougou's wildlife preserved for lovers of nature, the details of which are unclear.²⁸³

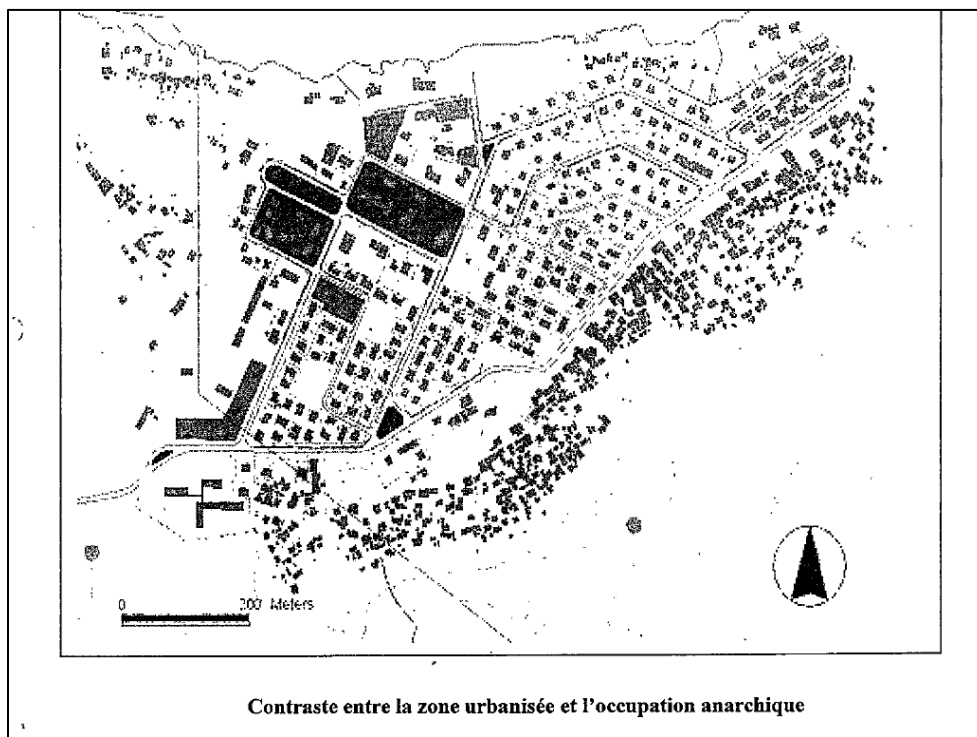
The government's ecological commitments intensified in 1976 with the creation of the Comité National de l'Economie Forestière. As previously mentioned, the harvesting of wood was de-prioritized as oil finds increased, allowing the Bongo regime to save face with an international movement towards preservation. The parliamentary law of 1982, assumingly pursuant to the committee's suggestions, broadened the scope of the formerly defined protected areas, giving their respective fauna *and* flora "absolute protection" where regulated. The law also prohibited in the *aires d'exploitation rationnelles*, of which much of the Ndougou was one, the further establishment of villages, encampments, and public or private roads susceptible to modifying the environment or natural resources. By logical extension, as of July 22, 1982 all oil exploitation in protected areas would thus be prohibited except in cases of declassification. Reports suggest, however, that this prohibition was regularly contravened in the Ndougou as the economic imperative of oil production took precedence.²⁸⁴ In 1983, the Ministry of Waters and Forests was given by presidential decree the nominal capacity to enforce the law of 1982. In doing so, several enforcements agencies, such as the *Brigade des Faunes*, were authorized to arrest anyone caught poaching or disturbing the environment in ways that contravened the law. Thanks to the relative unclarity of the law in zones of "rational use" such as that in Sette Cama, as well as the indigenous traditions of slaughtering for both protein and ceremonial purposes, locals have since regarded the protection laws and their enforcement with skepticism and even vocalized anger. Though the grievances were perhaps moderated by the cited failure to fully enforce the 1982 law's provisions, the held-out possibility of being fined or imprisoned for merely carrying out ones traditions, however defined, breeds much resentment to this day.

²⁸³ Maurice Patry, Anne Gallimard, and François Pédrón, *Babiroussa: une Vie Jusqu'au Bout du Rêve: Récit*. (Fixot, 1990).

²⁸⁴ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

4.3. Peak Oil and *Troublement*: Gamba and the Ndougou, 1989 – c.2003

In the early 1980s, production of the Gamba and nearby wells was in decline, as predicted by earlier geological assessments. Because the town had not been able to diversify its economic activities despite calls to do so, ageing oilfields would most assuredly have led to the degradation of the town itself, as Shell had been responsible for most of its utilities provisions and salaried employment. Nonetheless, between 1984 and 1985, Shell discovered what would together become Gabon's largest oilfield to date: Eschira and Rabi between 1984 and 1985, Kounga in 1986, Moukouti in 1987, and Niongu in 1988.²⁸⁵ The "Rabi-Kounga" sector became the largest reserve



Map 9: Anarchic population growth vs. planned urbanization, c. 1996. (Gamba Cadastral Service)

in the country with 439 million barrels, and by some measures the largest onshore oilfield ever discovered in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸⁶ The enormous scale of the find allowed Shell to continue its operations in Gamba, where all crude would thereafter be sent via pipeline as before, though at a

²⁸⁵ The discoveries followed two decades of disappointing results and significant improvements in logistical and seismic technologies. See M.G.A. Boeuf, "Rabi-Kounga Field, Southern Gabon." (AAPG Search and Discovery Article #91030©1988 AAPG Annual Convention, Houston, Texas, 20-23 March 1988, <http://www.searchanddiscovery.com/abstracts/html/1988/annual/abstracts/0164a.htm>, accessed December 29, 2018).

²⁸⁶ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Ndougou* ; One interviewee would refer to Rabi-Kounga as "la richesse essentielle du Gabon." (Interview with Georges Mpage, Libreville, July 14, 2015)

much higher volume and rate. By 1993, 50 percent of Gabon's total crude oil production came from Rabi-Kounga,²⁸⁷ located only 95 kilometers north of Gamba. Since Shell had chosen to operate Rabi-Kounga as if it were an offshore platform and forbade employees to live there with their families,²⁸⁸ Gamba saw its second period of industrial and popular growth as Shell reinforced its operations there to accommodate new oilfields to the north. Gamba, in many ways, had quickly become the epicenter of an authoritarian regime's source of foreign currency.

The discovery of Rabi-Kounga led to an intensification of the demographic processes engendered by the oil finds of the 1960s, as both lagunar autochtones and outsiders flooded Gamba and strained its capacities. Between 1981 and 1997, the number of salaried jobs in Gamba increased from 800 to 1,000, the vast majority of which were provided by either Shell or one of its contractors.²⁸⁹ Population data collected by independent studies suggest that by 1993, approximately half of the 7,226 people living in Gamba were non-autochtones, with nearly all new salaried positions going to non-autochtone Gabonese or foreigners. Many of the arrivals from other African countries sought and usually obtained either work in small businesses or in construction. The lagunar village population plunged and then most likely settled into a gradual decline, even after decades of relocations and depopulation. The Mayor's Cabinet Director attributes the beginning of the steepest era of lagunar population decline to the 1990s, and not until the creation of the *commune* of Gamba in 1993/1994 was a plan considered to attempt to halt the lagoon's depopulation. Paradoxically, the creation of the *commune* itself and the array of administrative posts that go with it only served to intensify the rural exodus.²⁹⁰ People moved to Gamba primarily work, but also for public schooling. Villagers of the lagoon, however, attribute the exodus to jealousy and witchcraft.

Two apparent exceptions to economically induced rural exodus were in the relocations of Pitonga and Sounga to their present-day sites. In the former case, a family quarrel in the 1990s led to a death, after which many of the original Pitonga's inhabitants became convinced there was a curse on the village. They then decided to relocate the bulk of today's village closer to the banks

²⁸⁷ Emmanuel Mvé Mebia, "Suivi des Caractéristiques Socioéconomiques des Communautés Rurales des Villages Sounga et Setté-Cama dans le Sud du Parc National de Loango." (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2004).

²⁸⁸ SMUH, *Gamba*.

²⁸⁹ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Gamba*.

²⁹⁰ Interview with Mayoral cabinet director, City Hall, August 28, 2015

of the Ndougou lagoon.²⁹¹ In 1994, Gilbert Kinga, the family head of villagers further inland, decided to relocate the village of Inyoungou to the present-day lagunar site of Sounga,²⁹² presumably in a calculated move to take advantage of Sounga's proximity to the lagoon and Sette-Cama.²⁹³ Since the present site had been controlled by the established Bayengui clan of the lagunar area, the incoming members of the Boundombi clan and Kinga had mostly likely obtained the consent of the Minister of National Parks, Mahotès Magouindi.

The phase marking the discovery of Rabi-Kounga in the mid-1980s to 2003, when the first objective reports of diminished expectations as to the benefits of the oil industry were published, is one of relative growth, in not only population but also in the monetization of the Ndougou's local economy, the arrival of several NGOs, the generally positive outlook of the region's residents, and, in some cases, their material lives. Of course, satisfaction with one's livelihood was neither complete nor shared by all classes of the Ndougou's diverse population, and this must also be taken into account.

The lagunar population in particular cannot be said to have substantively enjoyed the second, larger local oil boom. Material changes were little, and perhaps in some cases many people fared worse owing to the germinal stages of a local Dutch Disease. Youth were beginning to seek out salaried employment rather than stay in their ancestral villages and farm. Traditional systems of social solidarity showed signs of breaking down, as in the dispute which split the village of Pitonga. When infrastructural improvements were made, they were neither sustainable nor in tune with centuries-old traditions. The real benefits of oil, that is salaried employment, were disproportionately felt by outsiders. Only marginal contributions by Shell and NGOs seemed to provide a semblance of a buffer against a looming expectation gap that had long been in the making since Shell's arrival.

Most older survey participants and interviewees (aged 40-50 and older) indicated that times were, on the whole, better in the past. Among the reasons given for this impression were the host of benefits provided by Shell for free. These *ad hoc* benefits—for there was no policy dictating these particular benefits—included the use of Shell transportation vehicles such as boats and planes

²⁹¹ Blaney, *Caractéristiques Ndougou*.

²⁹² Anastasie Bilo'o B'Ondo, "Problématique du Zonage dans la Partie Sud du Parc National de Loango : Délimitation Physique et Validation Concertée du Terroir Villageois de Sounga." (Internship report for the Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2010).

²⁹³ Blaney, *Ndougou*, 14-15.

to visit family members or seek medical assistance in Port Gentil as well as the use of Shell's medical facilities when the clinic at Gamba did not suffice. Shell also routinely heard petitions by autochtones to be provided with various amenities from more motorized boats to fishing nets, and all interviewees commenting on Shell suggest these requests were often met.

Shell's direct impact on the day-to-day lives of the Ndougou's autochtones, however, was minimal. As the discovery and exploitation of Rabi-Kounga had given jobs mostly to outsiders,²⁹⁴ the vast majority of Baloumbou, Bavarama, and Bavili of the region remained farmers and fishers according to tradition, and enjoyed no large-scale mechanization which might have allowed their produce to compete with the food service contractors, such as Sodexho, operating under Shell. Villagers engaged in farming could expect between 15,000 and 60,000 Fcfa per month,²⁹⁵ which amounted to approximately 26 USD to 105 USD per month in 1998 dollars. While these proceeds from market sales were almost invariably reinvested in primary inputs, the remaining unsold produce was either consumed or distributed to urbanized family members in Gamba, out of necessity.²⁹⁶ Autochtones of the lagoon were thus caught in between traditional modes of social solidarity and a quickly monetizing local economy from which they were often excluded, however visible its manifestations were (Yenzi, Shell's housing for management, was increasing its capacity).

The paradox and resultant strain of heightened expectations versus actuality, fueled by the lure of money and inequality, was reflected in many traditional institutions, which according to various studies were undergoing transition. Here it is advantageous to recall that in the Ndougou and Gabon in general, the terms "tradition" and "village life" are nearly synonymous, as not only are villages still occupied by the spirits of ancestors²⁹⁷ and the charms or "fetishes" meant to conjure them, but also because modern living remains unsustainable in the Ndougou's villages. To remain in the village is thus to at least partially engage in "tradition." Therefore, in order to partially determine the fate of tradition, we can ask whether and why people remained in villages despite the growth of Gamba. Survival, of course, must feature as one of the chief reasons for why people remained in village life, as previously discussed with respect to farming. But survival often

²⁹⁴ Blaney, *Gamba*.

²⁹⁵ *ibid.*

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*

²⁹⁷ For example, all the villages of the lagune have one or several cemeteries grouped according to clan lineage. (Blaney, *Ndougou*)

depends on family bonds in contexts of stark material poverty, and this age-old form of social solidarity began to show signs of breaking down.

In many respects, lineage and family bonds served to tie people to their villages. In addition to providing themselves and urban family with food, people stayed to care for loved ones, ensure their children's education, or even act on a sense of clan affinity or duty. When asked why they had decided to stay in their villages, most middle-aged to elder interviewees and survey participants cited caring for loved ones such as elders who were no longer physically capable of tending to themselves. Some mentioned helping another family member, perhaps a chief, tend to their plantations. It could be that family and clan duties were prominent among the reasons for remaining in a village, rather than a sincere desire to prolong a traditional, prescribed way of living. The villagers of Ibouka during a group discussion indicated that the last real *dibandza*, or *corps de garde*, the focus of a village's traditional and communal life, disappeared around 1995, and that only their grandparents and elder parents were practicing Bwiti and Ndjembe.²⁹⁸

Others, of course, had children who needed to attend school. In 1997/1998, the Ndougou's villages had a total of 49 trained teachers assuring the national curriculum.²⁹⁹ In fact, Blaney (1998) remarks that families with children under the age of 14 were overrepresented in villages where a functioning school was present, such as in Sette Cama, Ibouka, and Mayonami. Uncoincidentally, it was in these three villages where most economic activity (fishing and farming) was taking place.³⁰⁰ The proximity to Gamba's market was highly desirable for the Ndougou's

²⁹⁸ Interview with M. Chambrier, August 9 2015. The majority of villagers indicated that their residence in a village was due to the presence of family a member.

²⁹⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

³⁰⁰ These villages had, in 1997, the highest number of houses under construction (Blaney, *Ndougou*).

villagers, thus it made sense for local authorities to locate schools in these seemingly growth-bound villages.



Photograph 2: Shell's Provisions Harbor in Mayonami. Roughly half of Mayonami's shoreline is off limits to non-employees of Shell-Gabon. (taken August, 2015)

On the other hand, the reasons for which parents chose to send their children to school bely a certain abandonment of tradition. Prior to the influx of tax revenue which Shell had allowed, the only school in the Ndougou was in Sette Cama, and parents from villages as far as took up to three days to row their children to the village in time for the school year. The effect was unsurprisingly a lower rate of enrolment, but that parents considered enrolling their children evidences an appreciating of schooling and its benefits for success in the modern economy, even before Shell's arrival. By the 1990s, villages were equipped with motorized boats provided either by Shell or the local authorities, and the compulsory attendance of children in school was near fully respected. This time, however, parents chose to move to the town in which their children were schooling, an indication that 1) they sought to remain closer to their children because clan affinity, and hence substitute parenting, could not be relied upon as in the past, and/or 2) they wished to reap the benefits of proximity to Gamba. In my own surveys, parents expressed their near-unanimous

desire to give their children better lives so they could acquire a well-paying job, a sentiment that clearly marks an abandonment of tradition as a means to live well, and which could be easily traced to Shell's presence. Salaried employment and modern schooling is not consistent with traditional living, and Blaney finds that in 1997, young adults were conspicuously absent from villages where salaried employment was unattainable, such as in Pitonga.³⁰¹

When larger shares of the autochthonal population—not counting those accompanying their enrolled children—did stay in their villages, much of the retention was owed to the presence of a cantonal chief who was able to assemble members of first-comer clans, as in Pitonga.³⁰² The inter- and intra-clan affinities and loyalties, in place since the arrival of the first-comers to the Ndougou, can therefore be said to have persisted, in part. Without the ultimate authority to enforce custom or land tenure, chiefs have had to rely on their *comportement*, or characteristics becoming of a chief, a more difficult task when former employees of Shell were beginning to occupy administrative chief posts. It is perhaps for this reason that the term *doyen politique*, used in contradiction to those who were not real first-comers in local power, made its first appearances in the 1990s.³⁰³ As in the past, chiefs could not be entirely legitimate without the proper characteristics.³⁰⁴ But while chiefs still commanded a degree of respect within their clans, evidence suggests they had difficulties enforcing certain land tenure customs, among the central pillars of a chief's traditional prerogatives. Although custom suggests outsiders must petition chiefs to use their land, poachers and fishers in particular regularly ignored the customary prescription, reportedly angering cantonal chiefs in particular.³⁰⁵

Even the strict matrilinearity of chief succession showed signs of unraveling. While non-Ndougou villages—more distant from the economic activities benefiting from Gamba and Shell's presence—such as Cachimba, Mbissi, Igotchi, and Mbouda, still retained chiefs within their matriclans, none of the Ndougou canton's did so. In Sette Cama for example, the first-comer Gassingua had transmitted the chieftaincy to another first-comer Loumbou clan, the Gavangui.³⁰⁶ Furthermore, while no women were represented in the chieftaincy when Shell arrived, there were

³⁰¹ Blaney, *Ndougou*.

³⁰² Blaney, *Ndougou*, 15.

³⁰³ Interview with Dimitri Ndomi, July 13, 2015

³⁰⁴ According to the daughter of Soungha's village chief, contemporary to this period, he was among the last chiefs to be reciting *contes*, or stories of the past. (Interviewed on July 30, 2015.)

³⁰⁵ Blaney, *Ndougou*.

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*

at least three in the entire *département* by the early 2000s. Lastly, one could speculate whether chiefs were beginning to be chosen according to a new criterion: salaried employment. In the past, spiritual and ancestral knowledge, the legitimacy to command others, and lineage had been the determinants of chiefly succession. By the 1990s, several chiefs were either under Shell's or one of its contractor's employment, and it would not be unwarranted to conclude that the *préfet* in Gamba, looking to satisfy his subjects, recommended the appointment of chiefs to the governor in Port Gentil who could most easily satisfy that respective chief's subjects. The Ndougou was clearly becoming more cosmopolitan and cash-dependent, yet at the cost of age-old bonds of clan solidarity.

In the realm of health, a critical factor in determining material well-being, only marginal positive changes can be recorded. Shell's financial contributions to the *département* and the city of Gamba in the form of corporate taxation, as well as its ad hoc donations, clearly benefited not only the minority of local workers considered fortunate enough to secure salaried labor but also whichever local inhabitants requested medical assistance. The clinic was giving general and pregnancy consultations, laboratory analysis, and radiographical diagnoses. It was staffed by a doctor, a midwife, and a certified nurse, in addition to auxiliary nurses who together cared for patients. A nearby *centre social* supplemented these benefits by providing a range of services for the elderly, physically handicapped, and mothers bearing several children. Charitable organizations provided the center with food and clothing which supplicants could enjoy, but only after a reportedly long and exhaustive application process via the state ministry in charge. In fact, Blaney (1998) remarks that the number of beneficiaries of this service remains quite weak, despite high demand. Furthermore, evidence indicates that even mothers benefiting from a nutritional service for their children which provides free meals often abandon their regular visits after one or two consultations. The center's observations came without a reported explanation by Blaney, but surmisable reasons might include the meals' incongruence with dietary habits, lack of convenience to the mother, or perhaps even unreliable supply provisions by the center.³⁰⁷

Evidence, however, points to a retention of traditional medicine despite the *ad hoc* services provided by companies including Shell as well as the often-unreliable services of state-sponsored clinics. Wagner (1986) remarked an upsurge in all of Gabon of the reliance on traditional

³⁰⁷ Blaney, *Gamba*.

medicine, and the Ndougou offered no exception.³⁰⁸ At the time of Blaney’s 1998 study, a medicinal *nganga* worked in every quarter of Gamba, harvesting an array of plants and trees, such as the sacred *muvengui*, for the treatment of several illnesses. The *ngangas* often worked from homebuilt “temples” and were instructed by their grandparents, who in one case were responsible for the *nganga*’s ability to identify dozens of plants in nearby forests. The *nganga*, treating both “modern” illnesses and those resulting from witchcraft, had to be initiated in either Djembé or Ilombo and respect specific rituals for the harvesting and application of treatments, demonstrating the vitality of traditional sects.

Patients to the *ngangas* were numerous, and numbered approximately 12 daily in the case of Plaine 3’s *nganga*. Adults were mostly treated for stomach ache and fever, while many children received medicines for diarrhea. For curses related to witchcraft, such as vampirism or *fusil nocturne*—typically a violent act perpetrated at night after which the victim remains unaware of the criminal’s identity—separate treatments were administered for both the curse and its physical, or “modern,” manifestation.³⁰⁹ For these purposes, the rate of adhesion to traditional medicine was a proxy for adhesion to traditional spiritual cosmologies, which evidently remained widespread in the Ndougou. Even the drawbacks of Shell’s presence, including the higher rate of alcohol abuse among autochtones³¹⁰ and the depopulation of autochtonal spaces, were understood as spiritual phenomena. Whereas alcohol is sometimes seen as a means to access more unseen dimensions, depopulation has consistently been attributed to the presence of vampires and witches.³¹¹ Reaffirming the endurance of traditional practices, Bwiti and Mwiri were still rituals practiced by autochtones in the Ndougou.³¹²

Another factor influencing the livelihoods of people in both Gamba and the lagoon since the discovery of Rabi-Kounga was the proliferation of NGOs dedicated to wildlife preservation following the attention garnered by the official identification of the Complexe des Aires Protogées de Gamba. In 2000, Shell-Gabon, following an international policy to demonstrate environmental consciousness and respect for biodiversity, offered to finance the staff emplacement and research

³⁰⁸ Alain Wagner, Richard Engoang Nguemas, and Vivian Oël, *Aspects des Médecines Traditionnelles du Gabon*. (Editions universelles, 1986).

³⁰⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

³¹⁰ *ibid.*, 46.

³¹¹ For more examples of this phenomenon, see Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa*. (Vol. 37. Univ of California Press, 2000).

³¹² Blaney, *Gamba*.

of the Smithsonian Institution, which thereafter occupied former Shell offices at Vembo. Dependent on Shell-Gabon's Social Performance department, Shell has routinely published in its gazettes Smithsonian's studies of elephants and other wildlife. Unfortunately, further environmental consciousness was not among the priorities of the lagunar population, which was unsuccessfully seeking compensation from the government for the crop devastation wrought by elephants, buffalo, and boars since the 1990s.³¹³

First among the Ndougou's NGOs in capacity, importance, and longevity has been the World Wildlife Fund, which arrived in the mid-1990s with the objectives of preserving the Complex's natural resources while promoting access thereto by the local population, and creating strategic partnerships with both lumber and oil companies towards achieving those former goals. In 1995, the WWF devised a plan with the government for the zoning, management, and protection of the Complex as well as for the environmental and rural development of the region in and around the Complex.³¹⁴ In 1997, the WWF began its environmental sustainability studies thanks to financial contributions by USAID's Central African program and the Netherlands' Directorate General for International Cooperation. Based on the depth and breadth of the WWF's studies as well as the consistency of its methods, it can be concluded that the WWF has been highly active within the Ndougou and has ingratiated itself to the local population. Many of its studies have been conducted with the paid assistance of autochtones who are trained in the organization's participatory methods in an effort to garner as much relevant socio-economic data as possible. Though marginal, the WWF's effect on the population seems to have been positive, as it not only employs autochtones but also advises and trains autochtones in sustainable farming and fishing practices.

The population boom in Gamba, engendered by the coming onstream of nearby Rabi-Kounga in 1989, further contributed to the Ndougou's fledgling cosmopolitan character and perhaps the urban development of Gamba itself. Until 1995, no cadastral service existed in Gamba, presumably because the national government had until the late 1980s felt little need to register properties, demarcate land, or conduct urban planning for a town which might cease to exist owing to older, drying wells. It was not until the late 1990s that this service had in place a development plan. However, by then, parts of the town and especially Plaine 5 had been developing in a chaotic

³¹³ Interview with Mireille Johnson, Gamba, July 21, 2015

³¹⁴ Blaney, *Gamba*.

fashion due to foreign immigration, rendering the town's planning efforts somewhat futile. Today, vestiges of poor planning remain, and Plaine 5 closely resembles the typical *bidonvilles* of many African urban spaces, where potable water is only recoverable from communal spouts, and housing is structurally insecure. In fact, Blaney (1998) reports that the detailed codes to be respected by anyone undertaking construction were rarely adhered to, and that developers often bypassed the cadastral service in favor of gaining building approval from Gamba's first-comer chiefs, each of whom were local and represented either one of the three recognized autochtonal groups. The mayoral offices, comprising an autochtonal mayor and two autochtonal vice mayors, sought in vain to improve the town's infrastructure, health and water services,³¹⁵ though it is clear today that their ambitions were not fully realized.

One probable reason for why the local political authorities were late to respond to the pressures of immigration was that the former *collectivités rurales*, of which the Ndougou was one, and *communes* became *départements* under the new decentralization laws of the mid-1990s. Not until perhaps 1997 was the Ndougou free to spend money as it wished. Until then, all decisions on local infrastructure were formally approved from Libreville.

Another undeniable reason for a late response was the rapid pace of immigration following the discovery and production of Rabi-Kounga. With only two years separating the field's highly publicized discovery and its first production in 1989, the local government could do little to meet new demands. Added to the strain was the centralized character of the Gabonese government, which had made local government utterly dependent on national ministers in Libreville for funds and decision-making until 1996.³¹⁶ By 1998, less than half of Gamba's population belonged to the Bavarama, Bavili, or Baloumbou, although their political power outweighed their real numbers. Roughly half of the households surveyed by Blaney (1998) came to Gamba due to a relative working for Shell or one of its contractors. More than 17% came searching for employment, and only 20% had been sent by Shell as employees (to contrast to the majority of family heads encamped at Yenzi—Shells camp for management—who had been sent there by Shell in the early 1990s). Approximately 18% of household heads were unemployed, and of those

³¹⁵ *ibid.*

³¹⁶ It was not until 1996 that Gabon enacted its decentralization laws, largely modeled on those implemented in France. See Chapter 5 for more on this.

70% were engaged in traditional farming and fishing subsistence practices, indicating little economic opportunities beyond the oil industry.

It is also possible to infer from the statistics that autochtones were scarcely represented among the salaried workforce and more often than not resorted to traditional subsistence practices. Firstly, at least 65% of Yenzi arrivals in the early 1990s came from other Gabonese regions, while the rest were most likely of European-American descent. Secondly, Blaney notes that no foreigners in Gamba were engaged in traditional subsistence practices, while we know that approximately 70% of Gamba's unemployed were doing just that, suggesting that foreigners and Gabonese outside the Ndougou were most likely to find jobs. This also makes given that unskilled laborers were only needed during Shell's initial phases of infrastructural building. Shell would rely on recruitment for its management and scientific positions from more urban centers such as Port Gentil.

The concentration of foreign and Gabonese immigrants in Plaine 5 where relatively chaotic urban development had begun was likely the biggest factor in causing local authorities to push for more social services. Plaine 5, as it were, was not part of Gamba's original planning from the 1960s onwards—it was not in any discernible way incorporated in electricity or drainage networks—yet its population rivaled and then exceeded other quarters of the town. Precarious living without the familial solidarity networks enjoyed by autochtones must have been the norm for Plaine 5's residents, as it would remain so in 2015. This explains the creation of the majority of Gamba's foreign African associations in the beginning of the 1990s, composed primarily of Malians, Senegalese, Beninois, and Togolese. The associations, to which members paid a weekly fee of 1,000 Fcfa, served a number of purposes, including helping their members regularize their alien status and the purchase of parade materials during national celebrations—an ostensible means to remind authorities of their existence. Most importantly, perhaps, the associations mutualized funds for the medical evacuation of their members, provided food for newcomers, and also provided a forum for mutual aid within national groupings. It is likely that the aid extended to the provision of employment in construction, electricity, or small retail as well.³¹⁷

The 1990s population boom resulted in not only strained communal resources but also tighter security and government oversight, which seemed to have been prioritized given the

³¹⁷ Blaney, *Gamba*.

relatively quick addition of several services to the Ndougou area. The number of gendarmes operating throughout the region increased throughout the 1990s, and a new control station was planned for Mayonami in late 1998, so as to better supervise incoming and outgoing traffic.³¹⁸ Shell, which had recently moved their Gabon headquarters to Gamba, was providing the gendarmes office supplies, gas, and vehicles free of charge; no such handouts existed for the lagoon's local population. In addition to buttressed security, representatives from the Brigade de Pêche and the Ministry of Agriculture received new local offices, the former charged with enforcing anti-poaching laws. A representative of the Ministry of Labor was also in place since 1994, though that official's effect on work-related security could be doubted. Authorizing all government activities was the *préfet*, who as the Ministry of the Interior's local representative also approved both municipal and departmental budgets.³¹⁹ The Baloumbou prefect therefore wielded considerable power over security forces and local decision-making, despite the recent changes to Gabon's constitution aimed at decentralization.

Nevertheless, thanks in part to the oil boom of the early 2000s and the subsequent spike in tax revenues, the Department of the Ndougou was able to implement building projects in nearly every village of the lagoon in an apparent attempt to encourage villagers to remain, thereby easing the infrastructural pressures on Gamba. In consultation with chiefs and local political representatives, the Department decided to construct medical dispensaries, primary schools, solar panels for street lighting, water pumps, *cases d'écoute* for radio communication and film entertainment, and *cases de passage* for esteemed visitors to the villages.

4.4. "Oil is like a human, it will die." Gamba and the Ndougou, c.2003 – c.2015

As early as 2003, it became more and more clear to Gamba's and the Ndougou's inhabitants that the oilfields at Rabi-Kounga were not only exhaustible but would eventually cease economic production, threatening the region's economic lifeline and the prosperity of its inhabitants. Only one quarter of a representative panel surveyed in 2003 believed oil production would continue beyond 20 years, whereas nearly three-quarters of the panel foresaw an end to production within

³¹⁸ The station, if not completed on time, had been erected by July 2015 when the author had occasion to directly observe a security check in Mayonami.

³¹⁹ Blaney, *Gamba*.

ten years. Interestingly, almost 44% of the same panel believed Shell would be indefinitely active in the region despite drying wells. Bissielo (2003) attempts to explain this seeming paradox as either a reaction to Shell's omnipresence or founded in the belief that the oil giant would somehow diversify its activities away from petroleum.³²⁰ Also interesting was the disproportionate optimism of people aged under 44 vis-à-vis other age categories, i.e. those who came of age after the arrival of Shell and who perhaps could not conceive of Gamba without Shell's presence.

Two objective factors help to explain these decreased expectations of further oil production. First, it must have been widely known that Rabi-Kounga's production had peaked by 1997 at 217,000 bbl/d, in line with original estimates and a significant difference from the reported 23,000 bbl/d in 2010. As the Ndougou's primary source of salaried employment, it is inconceivable that knowledge of these production rates escaped a critical mass of the population. Secondly, the benchmark price of a barrel of Brent Crude had fallen to historic lows of 20-30 USD and had not begun showing signs of recovery until 2005; neither could this fact have escaped the oil-dependent town. The period covering the early 2000s through 2015 can therefore be made qualitatively separate from earlier periods such as the oil boom of the 1990s. If oil booms represent spikes in actual and perceived benefits, then 2003 is the earliest known and documented instance of decline as well as the wider recognition that Gamba might one day have to make do without petroleum. How actual and perceived changes to local oil production translated to material and spiritual well-beings is now of interest.

Diminished expectations of Gamba's industrial vitality may have been either cause or consequence, in part, of a more important trend towards diminished economic morale and sense of security within the Ndougou. Bissielo's survey reveals that half of panelists were pessimistic about future employment opportunities, while nearly a third reported not having sufficient job security. Significantly, the same figures were substantially higher among salaried workers and civil servants, both of whom also enjoyed higher levels of education. Even more critically, administrative personnel in particular claim job prospects and security had deteriorated with respect to the past.³²¹ In the absence of detailed employment statistics, such data suggest fewer actual employment opportunities and lower overall formal employment.

³²⁰ Bissielo, Anaclé and Jean Pierre Ndong Owono, "Enquête sur les besoins et préoccupations des populations de Gamba." (Study conducted by Conjoncture – Observatoire des Organisations (C-O2) of the Département de Sociologie, UOB and Shell-Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: April, 2003)

³²¹ Bissielo, *Populations de Gamba*.

The despair linked to deteriorated job prospects *ipso facto* turns our attention to the breakdown of traditional means of social solidarity. As Bissielo states, “[Labor market integration] increasingly conditions peoples’ survival in young countries like Gabon.”³²² Using the same panel’s responses on the procurement of financial assistance, Bissielo is able to conclude that social solidarity in 2003 had no longer assumed the same function as it once did. In addition to a weak associative life, only 27% of the Ndougou’s inhabitants were receiving financial assistance from a family member. While nearly 60% of the entire panel stated that they would call on family for assistance in urgent cases, the figure dropped to 7% for salaried workers, 66% of whom preferred to call on their bank. (Let us not forget that the same sub-panel were among the most pessimistic with respect to job prospects and security.³²³)

The panel, however, may not have proportionately reflected the views outside Gamba, where autochtones have been predominant and the most prolific participants in subsistence and unsalaried work (unsalaried respondents in the above survey could only count exclusively on family for urgent financial assistance). If conceived as assistance to and from close kin, solidarity extended beyond the immediate family in the lagoon and oftentimes reached beyond the clan. Such had and has been the case with respect to interclan marriages between Sette Cama and Sounga and the consequent “good neighbor” relations between the two villages.³²⁴ There is no reason to believe such cordial relations did not exist between other villages and clans, as several interlocutors indicated they had “no problems” with outsiders; several first-comer clans to the Ndougou typically inhabit a single village.³²⁵

Another hint that intraclan bonds remained relatively strong was the persistence of several collective activities and prohibitions typically associated with “tradition” and clan identity. Although administrative chiefs at the levels of village, *regroupement*, and canton must all be appointed by both the prefect in Gamba and the governor in Port Gentil, the choice of these administrative chiefs always took into account traditional requirements such as lineage and good standing with the villagers, which explains why many village chiefs in 2004 could trace their lineage to founders,³²⁶ and also why there is little evidence of succession disputes. Despite the

³²² *ibid.*

³²³ *ibid.*

³²⁴ Mebia, *Soungba et Sette Cama*.

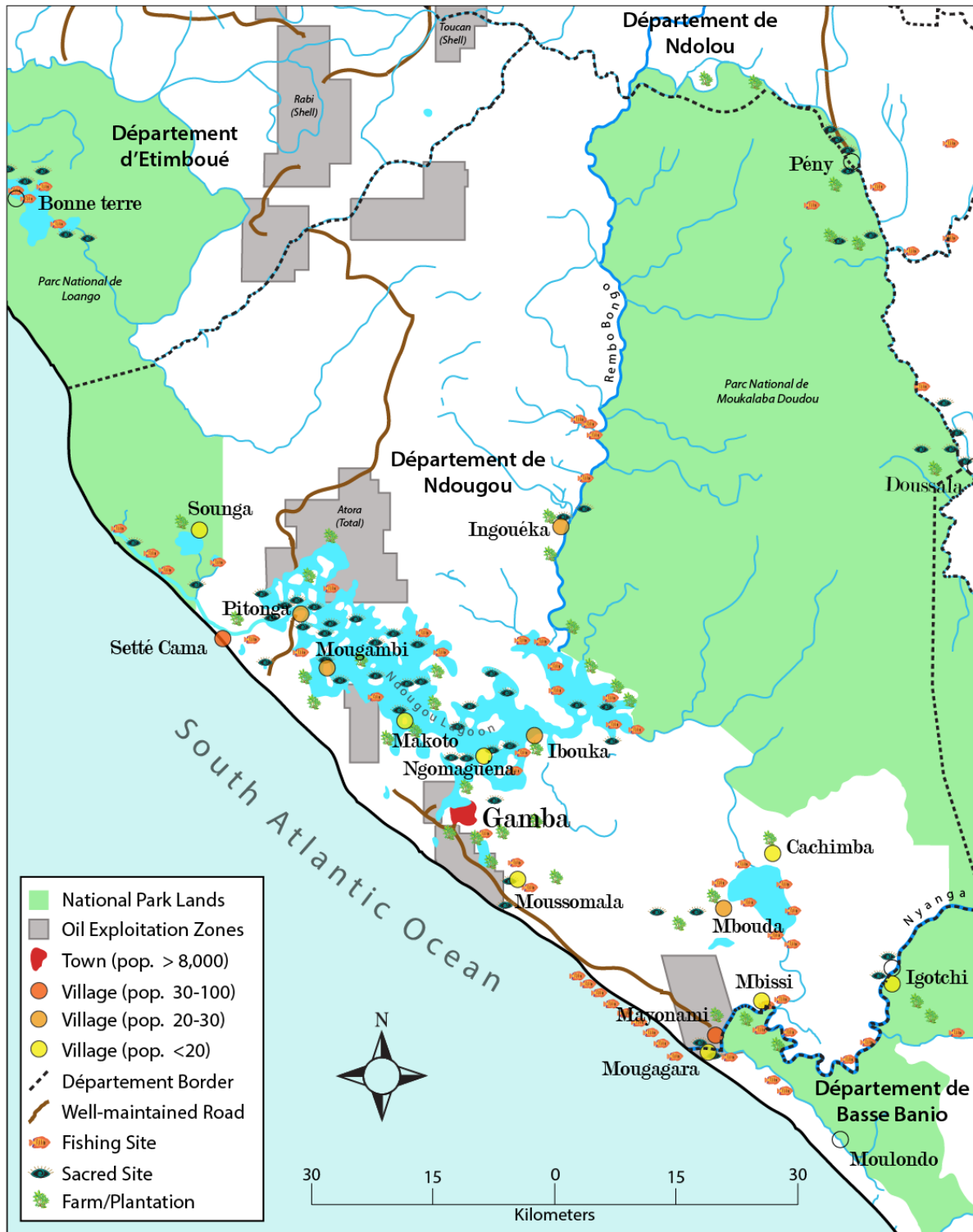
³²⁵ The cordial atmosphere may also be related to a growing pan-autochtone identity brought on by difficulties related to Shell, judging by the frequent use of “we” by chiefs characterizing the lagoon-Shell relationship.

³²⁶ Mebia, *Soungba et Sette Cama*.

historical intermeshing of traditional chiefs and the state administration, land tenure to a significant degree remained the province of certain *chefs de famille*, some of whom also serve as administrative chiefs. Mve (2004) observes that just as in 1997, the year of Blaney's study, land in the Ndougou consensually belonged to first-comer clans. Even in Mayonami, the site of Shell's provisions harbor, first-comer clans and their chiefs jealously guarded the land and disputed with other occupants who had nevertheless forged historical alliances, thereby legitimizing their right to stay. The shores adjacent to Shell's harbor are not authorized for use by anyone except members of the Bayengui clan. Elsewhere in the lagoon, the clan appropriation of land is demonstrated by the number of sites with economic or spiritual-historical significance, both of which are prohibited to outsiders. These prohibitions were in large part respected.³²⁷

³²⁷ *ibid.*

Map 10: Population, Livelihoods, and Oil in the Ndougou Lagoon (by Joseph Mangarella, 2017, Derived from WWF, Shell Social Performance Plan, and PDL)



Intraclan solidarity was also expressed through patronage and more formal, “nontraditional” arrangements. For instance, Mougambi has enjoyed relatively high-quality construction and communal grounds thanks to the philanthropy of first-comer clan member Mahotès Magouindhi, a former state-level politician who had died in 1997. In Ibouka, villagers formed the *Kuti Mavarama*, an association to provide mutual aid and assistance to its Bavarama members.³²⁸ In terms of traditional expression of solidarity, the practice of spiritual rites and dance evidenced the vitality of deeply communal activities in the lagoon. In Sette Cama, observers noted the presence of old initiation rites such as Ndjembe and Mwiri, as well as dances for several occasions such as Ilombo, Ekounda, Mabanzi, and Mulogho. In Ibouka, there was Mulogho, Nyambi, and Mugulu as well as Bwiti for men. In nearby villages, we note the presence of Bwiti, Nyambi, Mwiri, Ilombo, Mabandzi, Ndjembe, and Mugulu.³²⁹ Rites and secret societies perform several functions, among which is the provision of mutual aid to a widowed clan member. The author had occasion to witness this in 2015.³³⁰

Certain events in Mayonami—strategically placed at the mouth of the Nyanga—stood as a notable exception to traditional bonds of solidarity, others being the noticeable increase in instances of witchcraft, reduced reliance on family members, and the depopulation of the lagoon. In 2004, Mve reported an increase in land speculation from 1997. In that year, only three of 20 houses in the village belonged to outsiders. In 2003, this number increased to ten of 20. The shift was evidently not without conflict, as the proprietor of a fishing company, established in the town since 2000, was harassed by village youth for allegedly confiscating one of their fishing boats or stealing their jobs, depending on one’s particular interpretation of Mve. Perhaps related to the increased presence of outsiders, Mayonami, among the most populated villages at 115 in 2003, featured only one ritual dance, the Ekounda. The debasement of traditional dance, however, may as well be attributed to the appearance after 1999 of several Catholic villagers and *Christianisme Céleste*.³³¹ Elsewhere, in Sette Cama, the author heard the testimony of a bitter chiefly succession

³²⁸ Emmanuel Mvé Mebia, Stéphane Le Duc Yeno, and Simplicie Mbouity, “Caractéristiques socioéconomiques et culturelles sur la haute lagune et le Rembo Bongo (Département de Ndougou).” (WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2004).

³²⁹ *ibid.*

³³⁰ Ingouéka, September 5, 2015.

³³¹ Mvé Mebia, *Mayonami*; A few years prior to 2004, a Pentecostal church in Sette Cama had also been established (Mvé Mebia, *Soungha et Sette Cama*).

dispute which resulted in the imprisonment of the aggrieved candidate for village chief, though it is unclear as to what period the dispute took place.³³²

In Western society, the shift to more industrial forms of solidarity following monetization and capitalization—or commodification of goods and labor—took generations. It should therefore be unsurprising that by the 2000s, a perceived loss in traditional bonds was not corrected with public provisions, leaving much of the Ndougou’s autochthonal population disinherited. In fact, so heavy was the reliance on Shell that a representative panel was split on whether Shell or local government authorities were responsible for education (82% of the panel was divided evenly), infrastructure (50% of the panel was divided evenly), and road maintenance (36%-26% respectively).³³³ More damning, in terms of progress towards Durkheim’s version of organic solidarity, is the fact that in most of their responses, panelists revealed a biding lack of confidence in the state to provide the necessary components to lead a wholesome life in a monetized economy. The panel’s sentiments are unsurprising, as large majorities of respondents stated they were “dissatisfied” with the provision of health, education, and transportation infrastructure.³³⁴

One corrective to lack of mechanical solidarity (versus Durkheim’s organic solidarity) may have been the crystallization of local associations uniting people of similar vocations and economic destinies (not clans), though in many measures Shell had taken at least partial initiative. One such example was the creation of the Comité de Réflexion sur l’Après Pétrole (CRAP) in the early 2000s, a group of community leaders, administrators, and local politicians with the mission to implement measures to advance sustainable economic development in preparation for Shell’s departure. In 2007, the committee would draft ideas for a local development plan in conjunction with Gamba’s main actors, including Shell. In 2002, Shell in association with FODEX and CRAP sponsored a project to establish market gardens in Yenzi and elsewhere. In 2006, Shell initiated a microcredit scheme with FODEX and sponsored BIGUNU, a small group of 22 adherents attempting to transform their encampment into a village with small enterprises unrelated to petroleum. Just years later it was reported that this initiative had failed owing to microcredit defaults, and only six of the 22 original adherents remained.

³³² Interview with *notable* of Sette Cama, Sette Cama, August 15, 2015

³³³ Bissielo, *Populations de Gamba*.

³³⁴ *ibid.*

Grassroots associations also sprouted. In 2004, a group of men and women in Sette Cama established “Mafubu,” as association to promote and valorize traditional local farming practices.³³⁵ In 2002, small-scale commercial fishers in collaboration with the WWF and the *Brigade de Pêche de Gamba* established the *Association des Pêcheries du Département de Ndougou* (APDN), a trade association committed to sharing inputs such as nets and motorized boats. In 2009, the APDN succeeded in soliciting the support of Sodexho, a multinational food catering corporation, from whom the association requested oceanic fishing materials (fishers in the Ndougou must conduct their business illegally in the lagoon, as many schools of fish congregate in protected areas). Citing problems related to the basic functioning of the organization and the sustainability of such a venture, Sodexho declined to offer assistance in exchange for preferential purchases of fish, offering instead to assist in the creation of an egg farm.³³⁶

Lastly, in 2010, a group of 12 farmers established IMANE NZALE, an association with the mission to fight against poor transportation and crop-destroying fauna (especially elephants), often cited as the most urgent concern among the lagoon’s autochtones and farmers. The association petitioned for Shell microcredit, but was denied in the year of its creation. While the president of IMANE NZALE suspected political reasons since the group was not composed of autochtones, Shell’s management cited the failure of BIGUNU to repay its debts.

Farmers and autochtones subsisting on their agricultural produce faced more challenges in the 2000s related to *Complexe des aires protégées de Gamba* (CAPG) and further delimitation, often resulting in more stringent enforcement of anti-poaching regulations. On August 30, 2002, the former *Réserve de Faune du Petit Loango* became the *Parc National de Loango*, one of thirteen national parks created by law that year as part of the government’s push to advance eco-tourism. In 2007, a law assured locals of their “*droits d’usage coutumier*” within protected areas, and legislation later on further guaranteed the “consultation” of all interested parties, including communities in a park’s “peripheral zones.”³³⁷ Situated between two national parks, much of the Ndougou could therefore be considered a peripheral zone. By law, no decision could be taken which would alter the operations and prohibitions of activities within the parks without taking locals and their subsistence needs into account.

³³⁵ Mvé Mebia, *Sounga et Sette Cama*.

³³⁶ Sodexo Gabon/Gamba, “Rapport de Mission.” (Projets de Développement Durable Sodexo Madagascar. Gamba: November, 2009)

³³⁷ Art. 257, *Code Forestier*

The law 003/007 of September, 2007 established the administrative, technical, and financial management of the parks, led by the Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux (ANPN). In the CAPG (much of the Ndougou), striding the southern portions of Parc National de Loango, the ANPN would supervise the administrative and technical activities of the Brigade de Faune de Sette Cama and the WWF respectively. The ANPN's "*Conservateur*" along with the Brigade had at least 18 agents at their disposal to enforce anti-poaching restrictions.³³⁸ Until 2009, the two enforcement arms of the ANPN had made only a few dozen arrests and seizures, over 90% of which took place outside the formal boundaries of parks.³³⁹ Conscious of Shell's financial and public support for conservation, many residents of the Ndougou have associated the company with increasingly tough restrictions which at times puts farmers and hunters at peril.

In 2008, changing economic conditions led to a meeting of the ANPN's partners who agreed to re-zone the parks and spaces of customary usage with the CAPG. The decision seems to have been prompted by an alignment of interests between the state in Libreville and the Compagnie des Bois Gabonais (CBG); now that the end of oil production was conceivable, the country would refocus on the commercial production of lumber. Though clearly a threat to the Ndougou's conservationist NGOs, including the WWF and Ibonga, the decision to conduct re-zoning studies for the purposes of lumber operations was not met with local resistance.³⁴⁰ In fact, the reconsideration perhaps led to the addition of customary usage spaces and relaxation of certain restrictions, much to the relief of villagers including the village chief of Sounga and the cantonal chief in Pitonga.

³³⁸ Kovic, "Zonage Participatif des activités traditionnelles du village Dighoudou (PNMD)." (Mémoire de fin de cycle, Mofoumat JDD, Elève Ingénieur des techniques des Eaux et Forêts 3ème année. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2008).

³³⁹ Louis-Paulin Ndoide "Evaluation du système de surveillance et protection dans le complexe d'aires protégées de Gamba : Cas spécifique du Parc National de Loango (Secteur Sud)." (Internship report for the Ecole Nationale des Eaux et Forêts. WWF-Programme pour le Gabon. Libreville, Gabon: 2009-2010).

³⁴⁰ *ibid.*

4.5. “Europeans created needs that did not exist.”³⁴¹ Contemporary Ndougou, c.2010 – 2015

4.5.1. At first glance

Compared to other agglomerations in Gabon, such as Libreville or Lambarene, today's Département de Ndougou *feels* cloistered and sleepy. Its roughly 13,000 inhabitants, 10,000 of which were in Gamba at the time of this study (July-September 2015), are all but removed from the nation's aerial and road networks. None of Gabon's small airlines in Libreville were servicing Gamba's airport at this time unless by prohibitively expensive charter service (upon request, a company rendered a quote of approximately 15,000 euros), and no one was confident that ferry services would continue to Gamba after stopping at Port Gentil. For non-Shell workers, it seemed, the only means of accessing the region was by bush taxi from Tchibanga, a costly four-hour trek through beautiful forest landscapes in questionably maintained pickup trucks. At least one hour of my overland trip to Gamba was spent on no roads at all except sandy beaches, straddling plantations set aflame in preparation for the next sowing season. Approximately one dozen courageous travelers sat amongst a heaping cargo of yams in the back of the standard-sized truck, becoming airborne whenever the truck struck a bump or pothole. Upon arriving at Gamba's bus station, the passengers were caked in a thick layer of red soot kicked up by hours of oncoming traffic.

Such is the difficulty of accessing Gamba, and therefore the lagoon (apparently, even approaching the giant oilfields of Rabi-Kounga was out of the question due to Shell and state security checkpoints). The vast majority of Ndougou's population—those who are neither employed by Shell nor its contractors—are therefore enclaved by even the strictest of interpretations. Nonetheless, Gabon's second-richest department was not without life.

The “wealth” of Gamba is immediately evident in the Western-style, code-abiding housing which remains neatly arranged in rows akin to an American suburb, at least in Plaines 2 and 3 where Shell and SGAEI had originally intended to build. Plaine Bienvenue, where the Departmental Council and City Hall are located, Plaine 1, and Plaine 4 are ostensibly zoned for

³⁴¹ Interview with Dr. Sisso, July 28, 2015.

residential building, observable by the scattered housing and construction sites which dot the landscape. Yenzi, Shell's "camp" for managers, 15 kilometers from central Gamba (Plaine 3), is effectively a residential compound tightly secured at all times by gates, fences, and security guards. It is an impressive system of control for a compound spanning several hectares, at least enough to house hundreds of people with relatively high living standards. Within are contained dozens of high-quality homes—the nicest in Gamba—with garages and well-manicured lawns. A luxuriant clubhouse and restaurant wrap around a swimming pool, 200 meters from the tennis courts and the sandy beaches of Lake Yenzi.

Then there is Plaine 5, the *bidonville* striding the zoned Plaines 2 and 3 which has grown in chaotic fashion since the early 1990s at the latest and which is home to many African foreigners. Many homes here are mere damp and dark rooms, unconnected to water and sewage networks, and often separated from the external world by a simple curtain. Many, if not the vast majority, are engaged in either informal work, taxiing, or in *petit commerce*, clustered along the road which separates Plaine 3 from Plaine 5. This process is not at all unique in an African context of urbanization where migrant inflows are dense in space and time ; outdoor kitchens and latrines were just as common in Sekondi-Takoradi. The difference, however, is that the relatively small town of Gamba, for all its meticulous planning in conjunction with a multinational oil and gas giant, failed to react to such a predictable and manageable process of chaotic urbanization. The cadastral service, for instance, did not arrive until after the migrant influx took place.

Known simply as "Plaine 3," the commercialized district adjacent to Plaine 5 is also the hub of Gamba's social life, albeit for Gamba's working classes of Plaine 5. Those residing in Yenzi tend to stay put and engage in social activities within Yenzi's confines. Social mixing rarely takes place between inhabitants of Plaine 5 and Yenzi. When it does, it is typically via work emplacement at Shell or one of its contractors, such as Sodexo, Halliburton, or Engine, a Canadian drilling company. Regular buses operating throughout the day connect Gambian locals to their work destinations either at Vembo, the Shell Terminal, or at Yenzi itself.

Outside Gamba, there is yet further *enclavement*, as access to the rural zones of the Canton Ndougou and the Canton Bas-Nyanga is made difficult by the relative absence of roads. In the Ndougou especially, villages are separated by considerable distances; it can take roughly 45 minutes to arrive at Sette Cama from the *débarcadère* in Gamba with a motorized boat. In fact, the villages of Sounga, Mougambi, and Ingouéka and were only accessible via lagunar

transportation, while the remaining villages were haphazardly connected to former foresting roads. During the daytime, especially during planting season, the villages appear empty and only inhabited by elders, children, and chiefs. At night, those working at plantations return to lend a semblance of life to the otherwise dying and eroded communities. For some villagers, even Gamba represents a veritable urban center.³⁴²

4.5.2. Material well-being

The attempt by the City Hall and Departmental Council in Gamba to halt rural exodus, ever since the *commune*'s inception in 1993/4, has largely failed owing in part to decaying or nonexistent infrastructure and services. The host of buildings constructed by the Department during the early 2000s oil boom largely fell into disrepair. In Mayonami, the school and *case de passage* were gutted and abandoned, while the solar panel lights were inoperable. In Ibouka, villagers enjoy neither electricity nor potable water, and are forced to search out fresh water with rowboats. Their dispensary is without a nurse. In Pitonga, site of the Ndougou's cantonal chief, the medical dispensary has no medication, the water tower has no water, and the solar panels are inoperable. In Ingouéka, paradoxically farthest from the riches of Gamba,³⁴³ everything functions as they should except for the lack of medication, hospital beds, and a charged battery for the *case d'écoute* which would otherwise allow village chiefs to communicate via radio with the prefect in

³⁴² One villager upon hitching a ride on our *pirogue* from Sette Cama to Gamba remarked, "*Ca fait du bien un week-end dans les villages,*" mirroring a sentiment expressed by many metropolitan denizens around the world returning from countryside towns much larger than Gamba.

³⁴³ Interview with Marc Ona Essangui, Libreville, July 15. The poorest villages, he claimed, were near oil installations.

Gamba. It is impossible to note with specificity when these amenities ceased operating, but some have claimed they lasted until only months after implementation.



Photograph 3: Solar Panel in Disrepair. Pitonga. (Taken in August, 2015)

Though desirous of formal employment, the vast majority of the lagunar population are still engaged in “traditional” subsistence activities, which in addition to observation and eyewitness testimony is evidenced by the persistent consumption of manioc—among the Ndougou’s chief crop staples—and its importance to lagunar autochones’ diets. A concerning trend, however, favors imported food from Tchibanga as the pressures of monetization and a local Dutch Disease continue to unfold. To communicate with families, in Gamba or elsewhere, including with children enrolled in school at Gamba who require school materials, technology such as mobile phones and ready access to gas-fueled vehicles are now required, necessitating monetary earnings. Subsistence practices therefore must be modified to earn a surplus. As traditional *connaissances* (mostly lost to many villagers) cannot satisfy large-scale market demands, many farmers and fishers require technologies such as large fishnets, motors, chainsaws, pesticides, or electric fencing to deter crop-devouring fauna. In Ibouka at least, villagers cannot enjoy either of

these niceties and must harvest with traditional machetes, discounting any hope of revenue and capital accumulation and consigning the villagers to subsistence. Plantations are typically disorganized and staffed by elders (many youth have no desire to practice agriculture). Most produce will go to Gamba's Plaine 3 market to be sold and reinvested in plantations, while the remains will be eaten communally by villagers.

In Gamba's market, the Dutch Disease, exacerbated by the remoteness and inaccessibility of the region, has led to sharp price rises in staple foods such as manioc (in 2009 it cost 10,000 Fcfa for a bushel, while in 2015 it rose to 20,000) and potatoes. It has been claimed that Gamba is among the most expensive cities in the world, and if not entirely accurate, it is difficult to dispute. Reports suggest basic goods and services were even more expensive before the semi-complete road to Tchibanga was improved. In 2015, for instance, to print a single page in black-and-white in Plaine 3 cost approximately 50 cents USD, while a decade earlier it was said to have been double. It is unsurprising, then, that most villages still burn woodfires for cooking and forego the privileges of gas—which, ironically, is extracted in at least one location in the lagoon within eyeshot of fish-baiting rowboats.

4.5.3. Social, spiritual, and associative well-being

Such monetary pressures mean that those with sufficient salaries often provide for several families within the same clan, though evidence shows this form of solidarity is increasingly restricted to nuclear families. Mr. Koumba, the Loumbou jurist in Libreville, claims that even in their contemporary culture, it remains the case that “the uncle is practically the slave of his nephew,” and that upon the passing of an uncle, the nephew will incur his debts. Indeed, many members of the middle-aged generation have elected to remain in villages in order to care for an extended family, such as the village chief of Soungba and her little sister. In Ibouka, only four extended families (clans) comprise the village's total population of approximately 180, and there exists an undeniable atmosphere of familial intimacy in the community. In most of the lagoon, and even in Gamba, customary infractions such as adultery and even minor legal offenses such as larceny are still dealt with within clans, before resorting to administrative authorities. In Mougambi, the first-comer Imondo clan still proudly guards its totems and enforces its *interdits*

formels, such as the restriction on eating red fish. Every clan's elders, at least, are able to recall a complete list of such *interdits* and ceremonial *gibiers* to be eaten for spiritual purposes, though this practice is increasingly threatened by stringent national park restrictions.³⁴⁴

Despite the vestiges of clan solidarity, there is a widespread and grudging acceptance among autochthonal parents that they must provide their children with a quality modern education. Every parent interviewed expressed their desire to give their children a schooling which would allow them to obtain formal work, and thus a presumed better life.³⁴⁵ In a group discussion, the villagers of Ibouka, when asked why so many of their relatives have moved to Gamba, responded in consensus that if you do not have financial means, you cannot learn and progress; it is still the practice of many Gamban autochtones to remit money to their relatives in the lagoon. Confirming the recent insistence on schooling, Professor Djoumata, who teaches at the high school, claimed their students habitually tested first or second in the Province, as 81.25% passed the BAC for the 2014/2015 academic year. Gamba's high school, financed by Shell, is known to have a culture of rigor.³⁴⁶

Most middle-aged to elder villagers, however, hint to social anomie, as they frequently disparage the youth who yearn to have money and abandon the villages (Professor Djoumata claims most students want to work at Shell). The village notable of Mougambi lamented a frequent expression deployed by youth whose hopes are ironically in line with their parents': "*Il vaut mieux mourir jeune et riche que mourir vieux et pauvre.*"³⁴⁷ In keeping with the trend, few of the youth aged in their 20s or younger were able to describe the purposes of a *corps de garde*, as many of their parents were not relating traditional stories of the past—such was the occupation of their grandparents and great-grandparents.³⁴⁸ As a former civil servant at City Hall stated, knowledge of the past and traditional know-how "*se transmet des grands aux petits.*" One elder claimed that tradition "has totally disappeared" as a consequence. The youth, as such, are typically chided by

³⁴⁴ Villagers are often wary of discussing these practices for fear of legal retribution.

³⁴⁵ The village chief of Soungha, who makes wood-woven floor mats to finance her children's education, was most succinct: "I want my children to work. That's what it is these days." (Interview with Chef de village of Soungha, Soungha, August 12, 2015)

³⁴⁶ Interview with Professor Djoumata ; Results of the scholastic year 2014/2015 at Lycée Roger Gouteyron were provided to me by Professor Djoumata on August 18, 2015.

³⁴⁷ Interview with *notable* of Mougambi, Mougambi, August 21, 2015.

³⁴⁸ Middle school teachers also claimed that 90-95% of schoolchildren were self-described Christians and Muslims. (Interview with Middle School teachers, Gamba, August 7, 2015)

parents and elders for a lack of respect and knowledge of how to properly receive and interact with others.



Photograph 4: A public plaza in Plaine 3, Gamba (taken in July, 2015)

Money has also been blamed for dividing families³⁴⁹ and creating jealousy, which in the lagoon often leads to instances and accusations of witchcraft.³⁵⁰ A fisherman resting in Soungha claimed to have witches in his own family, while Soungha's chief had been accused of witchcraft in 2005 by the family of her recently deceased boyfriend who had been working for Shell. All villagers, young and old, unanimously believe that their villages' depopulation and exodus to Gamba was caused by a surge in witchcraft decades ago which has since subsided to an extent, closely mirroring the rise and fall of Gamba's job creation. Ngoma Herve, an agent to the prefecture, claims that "phantoms" chase people away. When a bar opens, he says, it can only remain open for two to three months before evil spirits steal the inventory. When a schoolteacher had been sent to Sette Cama earlier in 2015, he had taught for only months before spirits murdered

³⁴⁹ Interview with Tax Collector (*percepteur*), Gamba, August 6, 2015

³⁵⁰ Interview with "Mousse" of Marine Marchand, Gamba, July 24, 2015

him.³⁵¹ Unfortunately for villagers, protection from evil spirits and witches can only come from *ngangas*, who according to one account “have all left with the knowledge in their heads.”³⁵² Few if any *corps de garde* exist in the villages today, and the Sounga chief, though she would like to build one, stated that doing so without a *nganga* might lead to her getting “yelled at.” Neither do many people of the Ndougou consult healer *ngangas* to treat diseases as they once did, resorting more often than not to Western medicine to cure maladies and spiritual curses such as *SIDA* (AIDS) *mystique*.³⁵³

The pervasive belief in witchcraft among both Gambans and the lagunar population often collides and/or intermixes with the growing monotheistic presence, which appears to replace the spiritual needs fulfilled by abandoned tradition. The precise number of Christian churches is unknown, given the definition one ascribes to a church, but it is most likely anywhere from ten to 21. In any case, an explosion in Christian piety has been observed, and villagers often seek protection from a Christian God against witchcraft, much to the incredulity of Gamba’s Pastor Boudika of the Alliance Chrétienne, who insists witches and God cannot co-exist and aims to rid his congregation of such pagan beliefs.³⁵⁴ Pastor Boudika leads a congregation of 300-500 thanks to a recent “reawakening,” and spends much of his time hearing confessions and counseling congregation members on a common set of concerns ranging from marriage difficulties and work problems to diseases. Through these examples it is clear that at the level of politics and social interaction, ancient cosmologies are no longer salient. At the level of personal interpretation of life and all its complexity, however, ancient cosmology remains. The atomization of ancient cosmologies, it should be noted, mirrors that of social solidarity and can be associated with the intensified monetization of the Ndougou’s local economy.

With the absence of *corps de garde* and traditional knowledge meant to define a clan and its identity, it is unsurprising that, as an NGO worker with Ibonga claims, “there is no community spirit.”³⁵⁵ Village, *regroupement*, and cantonal chiefs who would otherwise function as receptacles of protocol, respect for the past, and spokespersons for their people now only act out their

³⁵¹ Interview with Ngoma Herve, my boat captain, Sette Cama, July 30, 2015

³⁵² Interview with Robert Moundanga

³⁵³ Interview with Dr. Sisso

³⁵⁴ The Senator of Gamba is a case in point, for he claimed “*Les sorciers ne sont pas au-dessus de Dieu.*” (Interview with Senator of Gamba)

³⁵⁵ Dr. Sisso also claims that the Ndougou’s inhabitants are not *solidaire* like people in Mali or Senegal. (Interview with Dr. Sisso)

administrative responsibilities. Many are former Shell employees,³⁵⁶ as with the *regroupement* chief in Sette Cama or the cantonal chief in Pitonga, while a few hardly set foot in their villages more than twice a year.³⁵⁷ Almost all chiefs describe their role as that of resolving conflicts and assuring the good, lawful behavior of their villages.³⁵⁸ In one case, the cantonal chief in Pitonga freely admitted that cantonal chiefs no longer know the former functions of a *chef de terre*, the last true one having died 15 years earlier. Jean Churley, the Ibonga NGO worker, claims that *chefs de terre*, whose powers derived from lineage, are no longer powerful as they fell out of favor with Shell.

If respect for local chiefs is a gauge of community spirit, then that spirit has waned. Reflecting the views that many lagunar chiefs have come to feel about their cantonal chief in Pitonga, one interviewee claimed many chiefs were simply “thieves.”³⁵⁹ Such accounts accord with what one opposition member and NGO leader claimed was the scourge of chiefs “bought” by the state for the purpose of controlling the population.³⁶⁰ Thirdly, strict matrilinearity, whose past purpose was partly to provide a framework of succession in case of an errant or wanted chief, has been observed as disappearing. In addition, dowries meant to symbolically bind two families are increasingly composed of money at amounts rivaling those exchanged among the wealthier classes in Libreville.³⁶¹ Lastly and more damning, the jurist and university Professor Nambo claims that in Gamba, oil money became a means to politically position oneself.

Though there is little action at the local level to reverse what most believe to be a dire situation, frequent mention has been made of a budding political consciousness,³⁶² thanks in no small part to the evolution of mindsets brought about by modern schooling.³⁶³ The chief of

³⁵⁶ Professor Mouvoungu claims that chiefs in the Ndougou today are both *nobles par excellence* as well as *propriétaires*. (Interview with Professor Mouvoungu)

³⁵⁷ Such was the case in Ibouka, where the village chief prefers to live at her plantation despite the criticism of her villagers. (Interview with villagers of Ibouka)

³⁵⁸ Mousse, the Marine Marchand agent, claims 80% of people respect the law (Interview with “Mousse”), and Chambrier, former civil servant, claims only 60% are able to read and understand the laws, after which they must transmit new regulations to their friends and relatives. (Interview with Chambrier, Gamba, August 9, 2015). It should be noted that an administrative qualification for becoming a chief is the ability to read and write.

³⁵⁹ “*brigands*”

³⁶⁰ Interview with Georges Mpage

³⁶¹ One interviewee has claimed, however, that this is merely an example of modern means being employed towards traditional ends. There still remains a vague sentiment that “*un chef qui ne partage pas n’est pas un chef*.” (Interview with Middle School teachers)

³⁶² Interview with Mousse ; Interview with Ndomi

³⁶³ Most middle-aged to elder villagers have not received schooling beyond CM2 (middle school), while almost all youth today at least attend *lycée*.

Sounga, among the most vocal of the chieftaincy, claims that little contestation existed in the past, but that today's youth feel freer to express their minds. This is confirmed in interviews among many young adults, who remain convinced that politicians are pocketing all the oil proceeds. Whether they have the resources to galvanize themselves and make direct claims on natural resources, however, is another question.³⁶⁴ With multipartyism, journalists now have the ability to openly criticize, within limits, the Presidency, yet journals and free information are scarce among the lagunar population.

4.5.4. Ambivalent authorities: The state, Shell, and clientelism

In 2013, The City Council and the Departmental Council, partnering with the United Nations Development Program and CRAP,³⁶⁵ published the *Plan de Développement Local du Département du Ndougou et de la Commune de Gamba* (PDL), the first development plan of its kind in Gabon. The PDL subsumes itself within the overall strategic vision of Plan Stratégique Gabon Emergent, Gabon's national development plan set out in the early 1990s. 86 pages long, the PDL is comprehensive and requested more than 76bn Fcfa to carry out seven "strategic axes" by the end of 2017, the costliest of which was the long-desired *désenclavement* of the town principally through the completion of the road to Tchibanga, estimated at approximately 50bn Fcfa. Other lofty goals include, in order of presumptive priority, the reinforcement of local governance, the promotion of human development, improving urban living conditions, developing *grands projets*, the promotion of economic diversification, and the promotion of tourism. Concerning the reinforcement of local governance, no explicit mention is made of corruption, patronage, or clientelism, but it implicitly recognizes the need to address management issues as a priority: "*Amélioration des procédures de gestion, d'affectation des ressources humaines et d'utilisation du patrimoine des collectivités.*"³⁶⁶

³⁶⁴ The taxi union, agitating for fair taxation and clemency from prohibitive licensing fees, is disallowed from organized protest until it formally registers as an association. To date, the effort to register has met roadblocks in the bureaucracy. (Interview with Cédric Mangala, Taxi Union Boss, Gamba, August 31, 2015)

³⁶⁵ CRAP, created in 1999 by community leaders, is noted in the plan as being instrumental in bringing its publication to fruition. (PDL)

³⁶⁶ PDL, 56.

The PDL estimated that it could finance up to 30% of the projected costs through the Department's primary source of revenue, the reputed IRPP, or corporate/individual income tax, which comprised almost 94% of the Departmental budget and which was almost entirely dependent on Shell and its contractors.³⁶⁷ Among the risks to the multifaceted projects, PDL listed economic crisis. Given that the Ndougou's economy was almost entirely dependent on the oil industry, many local civil servants (not elected politicians) expressed skepticism as to whether the PDL's lofty ambitions would ever be realized.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, although the departmental and communal budgets since the decentralization of 1996/1997 were autonomously spent (the National Assembly also legislates their budgets), revenue was first sent to the Treasury in Libreville before being distributed to Departments and Communes. This rendered the continued reimbursement of the Ndougou's budgetary coffers rather precarious, as it was well known the state had difficulties funding its master plans.³⁶⁹

The PDL is comprehensive in listing the concerns which were shared by many elected officials and civil servants in "the richest *département* outside Libreville"³⁷⁰, who during interviews more or less converged upon the seven strategic axes listed above. It is a point of interest, however, that no elected officials, or those adhering to the ruling PDG or the nominal opposition Alliance Démocratique et Républicaine (ADERE), cited reinforcing local governance. Civil servants and academics, on the other hand, made routine mention of patronage and abuse of official office through the awarding of public contracts to friends and the distribution of jobs.³⁷¹ Another frequently mentioned issue of contention was the increasingly money-dependent character of national and local elections, which were driven by parties (primarily the PDG). Several villagers, academics, and civil servants described how achieving votes was a matter of simple cash handouts to resource-starved villagers.³⁷² Guy Kassa Koumba, head of Shell's Government Relations Office, went as far as to say that "politics is the biggest factor influencing our decisions," and that it was simply inescapable when attempting to achieve anything substantive

³⁶⁷ 2015 Budget and Revenues provided by Tax Collector, Gamba, August 19, 2015

³⁶⁸ Indeed, many skeptics have pointed out that no tangible progress has been made at the time of this study.

³⁶⁹ Interview with Francis Bivigou, head of Gabon-Oregon, Libreville, July 13, 2015

³⁷⁰ Interview with Mr. Ossendo, SG of Département de Ndougou, Gamba, July 26. The Department enjoyed a total tax revenue of 6bn Fcfa in 2015.

³⁷¹ *ibid.*; Interview with Ndomi; Interview with Marc Ona Essangui; Interview with Mpage

³⁷² The notable of Mougambi, in particular, decries this practice. (Interviews with *notable* of Mougambi, July 31 and August 21, 2015)

in Gabon, not to mention the Ndougou. He also mentioned rampant corruption within the PDG, a reason for why Shell had recently taken to firmly suppressing unethical behavior in its ranks, and why the company had also begun more meticulously monitoring of its cash accounting.³⁷³

The latter development may explain why elected officials claim they shared a strained relationship with Shell. It may also be due to varying instances of pollution³⁷⁴ or the threat of Shell's (now-complete, as of 2016) partial departure from the Ndougou.³⁷⁵ Or, perhaps, it can be explained by Shell's downsizing of its own charitable efforts in the face of a global decline in revenue. Whatever the case, it is clear that elected officials, often criticized by various groups of people, do not particularly enjoy having public responsibility imposed upon them. Villagers, despite the fact that they scarcely pay any taxes,³⁷⁶ were more likely to deride the state for corruption and money-pocketing than they were to lambast Shell for increasingly ignoring their persistent demands for help in transportation or medical care. One interviewee, fearful for his life should his name be mentioned in the press, ridiculed the state, and especially Ali Bongo whom he termed "*un grand oiseau*," as opposed to his father, "*un petit ours*." The cantonal chief of Pitonga complained that the PDG "controlled everything" and that if a visiting minister suspected you were not supportive of the party, all his promises to deliver would be made in vain.

Nevertheless, the system of patronage does not seem to have been entirely absent from the non-political class. Dieudonné, a radio host, admitted that he was expected to give cash payments not only to his boss but other civil servants as well who had helped him obtain his job. When asked why, he simply replied that it was "normal." It may indeed be the case that modern means are utilized towards traditional ends.

³⁷³ Televised interview with Guy Kassa Koumba, Shell Terminal outside Gamba, August 10, 2015

³⁷⁴ Mr. Ossendo mentioned the blackening of the Vembo River and their efforts to prevent villagers from swimming or fishing in polluted waters. (Interview with Mr. Ossendo, SG of Departmental Council, Gamba, August 19

³⁷⁵ Ghislain, a manager of housing at Shell, lamented the recent "downsizing" and discontinuance of certain benefits accorded to Shell staff. (Interview with Ghislain Pither, Shell management, Gamba, July 20, 2015)

³⁷⁶ The Ndougou Tax Collector admitted that the payment of fishing licenses, e.g. was by and large based on good faith. (Interview with Tax Collector, Gamba, August 19, 2015)

4.6. Conclusion: The Microcosm Embodied by the “Man-Fauna” Conflict

Above all concerns related by the Ndougou’s autochtones was the crop-devastation wrought by elephants, a national issue at the time of fieldwork which led to a series of conferences in Libreville. Whenever one travels among plantations of the Ndougou, villagers will readily point out a large swath of harvest ruined overnight, either trampled or devoured by elephants, buffalos, wild boars, or even gazelles. The cantonal chief in Pitonga, though satisfied by a recent legal instrument relaxing anti-poaching laws, alluded as well to fishing restrictions, pointing at his *pirogue* and uttering “if we can’t fish, we can’t eat.” Later on, on a tour his plantation, he added that “we lay [illegal] elephant traps because we cannot buy guns.”³⁷⁷

The *notable* of Mougambi, in line to succeed as chief, explained that it was not only villagers who were ignorant as to the law, but the ANPN as well, ironically charged with enforcing it. He carefully related an episode where his brother had been imprisoned for killing an elephant outside of his plantation, and then promptly recited from memory the letter of the law, which stated that one has the right to *battre* an elephant within 1.5 kilometers of one’s plantation. The ANPN, during a group interview, did not repeat this recitation, but only agreed after a few minutes of pondering that one has the right to kill an elephant if their plantation is “threatened,” and that a plantation proprietor cannot actively hunt them “far away.”³⁷⁸

This issue is the one which most easily stirs the passion of the lagoon’s autochtones, as even the autochtonal *Maire adjointe*, Madame Panga, did not hesitate to say that elephants accentuate unemployment. When asked about their concerns and hopes for the future, villagers scarcely articulated “pulling down” oil rents or chasing away predatorial oil companies. That the people of a region home to sub-Saharan Africa’s largest onshore oil reserve to date exhibited none of the physical violence, contestation, or popular agitation found in the war-torn regions of Chad, Angola, or the Niger Delta is impossible to ignore. It does not mean, however, that other forms of violence, the debasement of tradition and the devolution of time-honored means to subsist, for one, were not committed. An unsettling pall of anguish hangs over the Ndougou, and a destructive peace simmers on. The next chapter is dedicated to analyzing, rather than empirically describing, the interactions and processes which led to the outcomes described above.

³⁷⁷ Interview with Chef de canton of Pitonga, Pitonga, July 29, 2015

³⁷⁸ Interview with ANPN agents, Gamba, August 14, 2015